




PLAYING *with* FIRE

SERMONS AND PRAYERS FROM
MARY BALDWIN COLLEGE
STAUNTON, VIRGINIA

BY PATRICIA HUNT

WITH TRIBUTES TO GORDON AND
MARTHA ANNE "MOPSY" POOL PAGE



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FIRST EDITION

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DEDICATION

To the staff, faculty and students of Mary Baldwin College

INTRODUCTION

These sermons and prayers for the opening of faculty meetings were written for specific people and occasions. They are like sandcastles, meant to be washed out with the next tide. I am honored that there are people who wanted me to pull them together in this book, but I am well aware how embedded they are in the times and places they addressed. I hope they will be helpful to the readers, but I have made no attempt to pull out references to circumstances at the times they were written, and I have made only feeble attempts to transform them from spoken to written style.

Anyone foolish enough to stand up and publicly talk about or to God is “playing with fire.” Perhaps the only proper response to God would be awe and stunned silence. I suppose we can be forgiven our arrogance only because we have been invited to enter into these reflections by the One who created us. Our enthusiasm for such conversations has, I am sure, far exceeded our grasp of wisdom and truth, but no matter; we keep trying to make sense of our existence.

Humor is used in some of the faculty prayers, an oddity which is often commented on. Believe me, no one was more surprised than I when they started turning out that way. I did not plan it, and I can't think of any prayer I have composed for any other occasion or group that was even remotely funny. But the faculty is funny; we really are. Affectionate humor just came out when I had to compose prayers for us. The prayers reflect an intimacy with God and one another that is unusual for public prayer. But, they just came out that way, as I said.

Acknowledgments are in order:

Gordon and Martha Anne “Mopsy” Pool Page for conceiving this project, continuing to encourage me to complete it year after year with no apparent results, and for paying for its printing when it was finally finished.

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My family: Ron, Sara, John, Sara Forrest, Jack, Beth

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TIMES THAT TAKE YOUR BREATH AWAY

Ezekiel 37:1-10

This morning's text comes from Ezekiel 37. The prophet describes an experience he had at perhaps the lowest point in his life. Hope had evaporated. There was no good reason to believe the situation would improve much.

Ezekiel said this:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. (NRSV)

The Lord set down Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones and asked, “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel does not know the answer. “O Lord God, you know.” (But I don’t, and I tend to doubt it.)

I think this story gets to us because life has set us down in a valley of dry bones more often than we would like, set us down in a place so barren, so difficult, that we’re not sure if we will ever make our way out. When I hear Ezekiel describe the valley of dry bones, I recognize the landscape. I’ve put in some time here. So have people I know. . . after the death of someone much loved, because the marriage or other relationship didn’t work — seemingly couldn’t work, because depression set in like a heavy wet blanket smothering a person on a hot day, because of a failure, a stinging humiliation that tore the flesh right off the bones, because an illness struck.

“Mortal, can these bones live?”

“O, God, you know.”

The valley of dry bones – I’ve been there. But I got to wondering how Ezekiel got there. What was it that landed him in the Valley of Despair? What had sucked all the hope out of his life?

It sounds a bit odd, but you might say God did it. God gave Ezekiel a gift, the gift of seeing the truth, the gift of moral clear-sightedness, the ability to see the nation as God saw it. And it was to national problems that Ezekiel addressed himself. Ezekiel couldn’t pretend that the nation was doing well in the sight of God because he had been given this peculiar God-sightedness. He had been given moral 20/20 vision. And what he saw was enough to horrify anyone.

The record of what Ezekiel saw and told the nation is contained in the first twenty-four chapters of his book, twenty-four chapters of warnings and condemnations of his fellow Judeans. Then there are eight chapters of what was wrong with other nations. And by the time we reach chapter 33, the worst predictions of Ezekiel had come true. The nation had been utterly vanquished militarily, and the temple lay in ruins. It was over.

Although we live in a very different time and place from Ezekiel, something of his crisis of hope may be ours as well. For about three decades we in the United States have been bombarded with revelation after revelation of what’s wrong with this country. I don’t know exactly when it began – how does one date these things? But, if we had to pick a time, the day John Kennedy was assassinated would be as good as any. I was a student at Peace College the day it happened. I had gone to my room after lunch when the

news came over the radio that he had been shot. I went up and down the hall looking for people to tell. It is a measure of how much this country has changed that no one believed me. Today, everyone would believe it. I went to French class, and we all listened to the radio as the announcement came, "The President of the United States is dead." Then there were Dr. King and Robert Kennedy and the war in Vietnam. The postwar burst of economic activity and a rising standard of living stalled in the early 70s. People discovered that we were indeed poisoning our own planet and extinguishing plant and animal species at an alarming rate. Historians began to reveal the flaws in our former heroes, from Thomas Jefferson to John Kennedy. All, it seemed, had sinned and fallen far short of the glory of God.

More and more the declared principle and American commitment to equal opportunity for every child born in this nation gave way to unbridgeable chasms between inner city and outer suburb. And we knew it was wrong. Where I come from in North Carolina, if you go back three to five generations in anyone's family, you get to a farm. Most Americans come from ordinary people and know the importance of opportunities for the children of ordinary people. The institutions that had held us together were shaken. We never had a lot of faith in government. Let's face it, we've been suspicious of government ever since London was our capital city. But we lost faith in the government's ability to do anything. The business community went into a frenzy in the 1980s, in what one economist called the triumph of finance over industry. Cleverness in making money was more valuable than cleverness in making things like furniture and clothes, appliances, and even cars. The churches weakened in influence over the larger society. People who themselves attended public schools in the 50s and 60s were afraid to send their own children to those same public schools and bought their children a private education closed to their lower-income fellow Americans.

Race continued to be a problem the nation had failed to solve. It seemed to get worse rather than better. Polarization – liberal–conservative, black-white, pro choice-pro life, gay-straight – divided us into competing and increasingly hostile groups. The family seemed simply to come apart. The individual marriages and stories are all different, but taken together they are a part of a larger national story. Having rejected the clearly patriarchal marriages of previous generations, the baby boomers served as the advance troops into a radically altered social world, and they paid a huge price.

Ezekiel was set down in a valley of dry bones because Ezekiel had

seen the unvarnished, awful truth about his country. We live in a time when we have all seen so much of the truth about this country that we too know what it is to wonder about the future.

“Mortal, can these bones live?”

“Oh Lord God, you know.”

So what I want to know in these times is how did Ezekiel get his hope back? How did that happen? Because it needs to happen for me. It needs to happen for you who have to go out there and live your whole lives in this new reality.

When the personal crisis comes, when despair sets in, when our lives come unraveled at the seams, we need to know, how do we go on? How do you go on? Is it possible for hope to rise up out of the dry bones of despair? “Mortal, can these bones live?” I think there is a message in this story for us.

The first thing I notice is that real hope, God-given hope, arose from looking squarely at the dry bones – no running away, retreating into my private life in my private home, turning off the TV news and canceling the subscription to the paper, trying to create a personal zone of comfort and posting guards to keep away unpleasant people and realities. No, the Lord God didn’t send Ezekiel to Club Med for R & R until he recovered. The hand of the Lord came upon him, the gentle hand of the Lord came upon him, and the Spirit set him down in the middle of the valley. And Ezekiel was led around the many bones. He saw all of them. He wasn’t spared. Ezekiel’s rebirth of hope began smack dab in the middle of a long, hard look at reality. We will never find our hope at Club Med – rest maybe, but not hope. Hope will be revealed to us only in the valley of dry bones.

God does not try to cheer up Ezekiel, “Oh Ezekiel, it’s really not so bad.” I’m glad about that. What is worse than being cheered up when you are not ready for it?

The Lord God gives Ezekiel a chance to say his piece. “What do *you* think Ezekiel? Can these bones live?”

And then the Lord God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. God takes Ezekiel into the partnership with the divine. The mortal man and the holy God join forces. “Prophesy to the bones.” Now Ezekiel was, after all, a prophet. I suppose if he had been a teacher, God would have said, “Teach to these bones.” Had he been a seamstress, he might have said, “Take a needle and thread and sew.” He told Ezekiel to do what he had been called to do. Do it to the bones, for the bones, in the midst of the bones. And God, for

the divine part, would cause the bones to respond, lay on the sinews and flesh. And breathe breath into them, the breath that had been stolen away by the horrors of history.

And so Ezekiel did his part. He prophesied to the bones and sinew was laid on them and flesh. But there was no breath. The bones took on the appearance of life, but there was no life in them. They were dead. Bone to bone, sinew, flesh, but no breath – zombies. Perhaps the Lord God almost lost Ezekiel at that moment. But God didn't let go of Ezekiel.

"Prophecy to the breath

Prophecy, mortal.

Call on the four winds

to breathe on the slain

That they may live."

And Ezekiel did it. And the breath came to them and they stood on their feet, a vast multitude. But let's not get carried away. The nation was never going to go back to what it was before. Solomon's temple was gone forever. There was to be no "back to the future." From here on out, things would be different.

The same is true for us, personally and as a nation. The other side of the valley of dry bones is never the place we came from. For those of you who loved the 1950s, by reputation if no other way, I am here to announce to you that they are gone forever. "Father Knows Best" and the Cleavers (if they ever existed) are not coming back. Never again will the family look like that. It's over. There will never again be a time when the world's economy is completely dominated by the U.S. economy. It's over. The 60s aren't coming back either, no matter how popular bell-bottoms become. The 70s, the 80s. Gone. Gone forever. The future, our future, may be nothing like what we would order if history were a catalogue and we could choose what we like and charge it to our Visa Card. No, we don't get to order our future.

It will be our task to revitalize national life and institutions. That is what I believe we are called to do as we enter the twenty-first century: revitalize economic life in new ways that exploit neither the earth nor its poorest citizens. It's never been done before, but we are called to do it. We are called to deal with the extreme polarization in our nation and our world so that the fate of Yugoslavia does not become the fate of us all. We Americans, especially in the South, know what it is for brothers and sisters to turn on each other. We had our civil war. We are called to revitalize marriage, family,

church, and education in ways never done before. Can it be done or is it hopeless?

God promises nothing about the future except that it will be ours and God's together and that life can come, even out of valleys of dry bones. Divine life can be breathed into mortal beings, into clay, into people like us, you and me, *no matter what happens*. And so I say to you as you leave Mary Baldwin College and go out into an uncertain future, don't worry. No matter what happens, God will take you by the hand, and the Spirit of the Lord will lead you where you need to be. Don't be afraid, though you walk through the valley of the shadow of death or be set down in the midst of the dry bones.

The Lord can breathe life into the dearest of people and nations and situations. The God who brought Ezekiel from despair to hope, who brought hope to a defeated nation, and who raised Jesus from the dead, is *your God too*. The God of Israel and Judah is the God of all nations and is more powerful than all the sinfulness of humankind and all the forces of destruction at work in the universe. May this God breathe life into our nation and the world. May this God be with you every step you take, every day you live, and keep you close and breathe life into you.

The steadfast love of God endures forever. This is the word of the Lord.

Amen.

May 30, 1993

A CHRISTMAS PRAYER

O Hidden and Mysterious God,

I come again to the Holy Season of Christmas and Hanukah.

Christian and Jew will perform again the old rituals
and recite the old stories of your divine intervention into history,
but it's been years since we have truly believed in such a thing.

God of History?

When the Allied troops liberated
Buchenwald, Dachau, Belsen, Auschwitz, Linz, Lublin,
When the mushroom cloud formed over Hiroshima,
we killed you.

We counted up our forty million dead,
slaughtered in history,
and we decided that to call you a God of History
would be to link you with monstrous evil.

To be sure there were some
who still thought they saw a pattern,
a meaning in history:
Marxists
assorted nationalists, some clearly fascist,
liberation theologians
and, of course the Christians who declared we
were at the Endtime
and seemed to worship the God of Armageddon.

But I was not among them.
So I and other like-minded souls
 contented ourselves to see you in
 a newborn baby,
 a Bach fugue,
 a sunset,
 a friendship,
 a well-lived life.

I suppose I had a lot more in common with the pagans of the
 ancient Near East than with the Jews.

The Canaanites knew you were to be found in
 bountiful crops, fecund flocks, and houses full of children.
The Jews alone looked for you in history.

It was difficult to believe they were right,
 living as I do on this side of the Holocaust.

But that was before the astonishing events in Eastern Europe,
 before the borders were thrown open,
 before the Berlin Wall fell,
 before there was the possibility of lasting peace in Europe
 for the first time since the collapse of the Roman Empire.

Events so sudden
 so unexpected
 explainable, and yet eerily incomprehensible and inexplicable.

Suddenly I knew how people could have told a story
 of dry land appearing where before there had been only
 the Sea ahead and the Pharaoh's army behind.

I could imagine the walls of Jericho tumbling at the trumpet's sound,
 or lights in the temple kept burning only by the Will of God.

Was that you in Budapest and Warsaw, Prague and Berlin?

Are we to dare to hope again in the God of History?

So this Holy Season I ask what Moses asked, sandals in hand before the burning bush:

What is your name?

When my children ask, who shall I tell them you are?

Is it any longer possible to proclaim your presence
without being arrogant
or dogmatic
or just plain mistaken?

Who are you?

Where are you?

For now I can say with thanksgiving and newfound wonder the words of Isaiah:

*The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
They that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death
upon them has the light shined.*

*For Thou has broken the yoke of his burden,
and the staff of his shoulder,
The rod of his oppressor,
as in the day of Midian.*

Amen.

Used in place of the Prayer for the Faculty on December 1, 1989

GRACE UNDER FIRE

II Corinthians 10: 7-12; 11: 8-11, 21b-29; 12: 1-10, 20; 13: 11-14

II Corinthians contains fragments of perhaps six letters Paul wrote. Chapters 10-13 is thought to be a fragment of a letter written at a time Paul was in a serious conflict with the congregation at Corinth, which he had started. He thought of himself as its father, a paternalism we might not approve of in our age of democratic government.

Paul had been persecuted by the Romans and by the traditional Jewish community to whom he was a heretic, but that may have been more bearable than his rejection by the quarrelsome Corinthian Christians. His own church had informed him that there were other “superlative apostles” whom they intended to follow, apostles more impressive in God’s revelations to them and better public speakers to boot.

It is one thing to be fired upon by your enemies. That is to be expected. But to take fire from our friends, people we have sacrificed for and loved, is another matter entirely.

As we come to the end of this bloody century, as twelve civil wars rage today around the world, as we in the United States struggle to keep families from tearing apart and indeed the whole fabric of American society from tearing apart, I want to know if old Paul has anything useful to say to us living in our contentious households and workplaces in a fractured and contentious world.

Listen to God’s word to us in these selected verses from Paul’s letter to the Christians at Corinth.

II Corinthians 11:21b-29

But whatever anyone dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool— I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman— I am a better one; with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus

one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and am I not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?

12:1-10

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows — was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think the better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

Parker Palmer, a scholar and writer, about fifteen years ago went to live at Pendle Hill, a 55-year-old Quaker living/learning community near Philadelphia. He described it as “a place where everyone from teachers to cooks to administrators receives the same base salary as a witness to community.” “At Pendle Hill rigorous study of philosophy . . . goes right along side washing the dishes and making decisions by consensus.”

What did he learn? He learned that community, for which he yearned, is “terribly difficult work for which we are not well prepared.” Palmer wrote, “. . .the degree to which a person yearns for community is directly related to the dimming of memory of his or her last experience of it. Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives. . . When that person moves away, someone else arrives immediately to take his or her place. . .”

Does this ring true for you? It does for me. Family members can be a trial. A comedian on TV said to the audience, “Tell me, if you weren’t related to these people, would you ever see them?” In some cases, the answer is *no*. No, if I weren’t related to Uncle Henry, there is no chance that I would ever see him. Some of our greatest challenges, our most demanding relationships, are right in the bosom of the family and in the work place.

But it isn’t just among family and co-workers where conflict occurs. There is national conflict, societal conflict. Where the government has power and weapons and the people don’t, you have totalitarianism. You’ve got China. Where the people are divided into factions with weapons, you have civil war. You’ve got Somalia and Bosnia. Where no one cooperates with anyone else and everyone has weapons, you have chaos. You’ve got Miami and parts of Washington and New York and Philadelphia and Los Angeles.

Abraham Lincoln described our American experiment as a “nation conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal” and characterized the Civil War as “testing whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.”

The experiment set in motion by the founders and framers of the United States continues today in this country and other liberal democracies around the world. The jury is still out on whether this system can overcome the tendencies toward totalitarianism, civil war, and chaos that are ever

present. It is a fairly brief experiment in the history of the world. Can political power be relatively evenly distributed without civil war or chaos or a reversion to the concentration of power in the hands of a few to ward off disorder?

Martin Luther, a major figure in moving power away from a centralized source (Rome and the Catholic Church) into the hands of the people, was not so certain disorder could be avoided. When the peasants revolted against the German princes following what the peasants saw as Luther's lead, Luther told the princes to kill them. He knew that the distribution of power among the many was difficult at best and extremely dangerous. He was not willing to take that risk.

This matter of conflict is not a little matter of getting on better with the folks at home or better management at work or learning to appreciate each other more or singing a few choruses of "We Are the World." It is tough and dangerous work for which we are poorly prepared and not temperamentally well suited.

If there were any good alternatives to taking it up as a task and calling, I would be the first to choose them. I don't like conflict much, although I'm sure I've done more than my share to create it along life's way. (If I fail to say that, there are people in the room who would surely point that out to me before the day is over.)

Neither we living in the late twentieth century nor Paul in the first century are strangers to conflict. It is endemic to human life, not some sort of aberration, that, if we play our cards right, we can avoid. Our only choice is living with grace under fire or allowing conflict to eat away at our souls, distort our vision and our character, and destroy us more surely than any external enemy could ever do.

What can Paul teach us about grace under fire? The first thing I notice is that Paul believes God has set limits on him. The Lord gave him authority for building up the church, not for destroying it. Even those of us who have little power in the world have some people in our lives that we have the power to mortally wound. We know where their vulnerable points are. We know exactly where to stick the knife. Yes, we do.

A lot of us are at times members of groups or coalitions that have the power not only to oppose other groups, but to humiliate, wound, and even destroy them. More and more we are seeing the spectacle of groups who treat their opponents as if they are in league with Satan. Political par-

ties and candidates claim moral superiority and imply that their platform and God's platform are in all their essentials the same platform. Religious groups are notorious for demonizing their opponents.

Paul, in spite of everything, does not believe he has permission to inflict the damage he undoubtedly knows how to inflict on this congregation that seems so to deserve it. Limits have been placed on him, for his own benefit as much as for the Corinthians. It would endanger Paul's very soul if he lashed out at them. We always want to believe this time is different, but it never is. However, those limits do not include rolling over and playing dead, being a doormat, or wallowing in guilt.

Paul is extraordinarily straightforward and truthful about how he sees the situation. As he says elsewhere, he speaks the truth in love. He counters their accusations and states clearly and persuasively what he believes about himself and the Corinthians.

But the primary reason Paul is able to experience grace under fire is because of his peculiar notion that God's grace is sufficient for him, and God's power is made perfect in Paul's weakness.

A preacher is never supposed to give academic information in sermons, so I have to beg your indulgence for this part, but it is necessary if we're to hope to understand Paul. To Western Christians, the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, the cross is about forgiveness of sins. To Eastern Christians, Russian and Greek Orthodox, the cross is about overcoming death and finitude. Christ is the cosmic redeemer.

To Paul the cross is about the power of God at work in weakness. Paul never talks about Jesus the great teacher or miracle worker. Paul talks about Jesus Christ who was crucified in weakness, that the power of God was made manifest in the weakness of a man dying on the cross. He believes that the power of God is made manifest, is most perfectly at work, in Paul's own powerlessness.

We like the verse that says "I can do all things through God who strengthens me." We talk about God enabling us to triumph over our problems. We even say "Let go and let God," but *we* are the subject of that sentence. We are the ones doing the letting go and the letting God. The West is a place of doing, of control. That is our strength and our weakness. Paul is talking about something so alien to us he may as well be a Martian. Oh, we've heard of it.

Frederick Buechner in his autobiographical book *Telling Secrets*

describes briefly his own experience of his daughter's three-year illness. She had anorexia; she simply starved herself nearly to death and had to be hospitalized and fed against her will because she was on the verge of death.

Buechner wrote of going to visit her in a hospital 3,000 miles from home. All his efforts to save his daughter, to rescue herself from herself and her illness, had utterly failed. She had still chosen a course that would have resulted in her death had not doctors, nurses, social workers, and a judge stepped in.

Buechner wrote, "I have never felt God's presence more strongly than when my wife and I visited that distant hospital where our daughter was. Walking down the corridor to the room that had her name taped to the door, I felt that presence surrounding me like air – God in His very stillness, holding his breath, loving her, loving us all, the only way he can without destroying us."

He also wrote that "the sad and scary things themselves were, as it turned out, a fearsome blessing." Not that God caused them, but through the weakness of humankind the power of God was made manifest. Through weakness God bestowed a fearsome blessing. It is this great insight of Paul and early Christianity that has almost been lost in the West.

Paul has much to boast of: persecutions that were sources of status in the early church, revelations so incredible he refuses even to talk about them. Others may regard them as "good credentials," but Paul does not. Paul boasts of Christ's crucifixion in weakness. Paul boasts of his own weakness, but Paul knows that he sounds like a fool preaching folly.

Here we are nearly twenty centuries later. Never has our own weakness been more apparent than in this century. The world's best educated, most affluent and advantaged people, the world's technologically superior societies have used their advantages and wealth to build weapons of previously unimagined power and have taken up arms against each other in two world wars.

Our own society is increasingly exposed as more fragile than we once thought. Violence is a daily occurrence. Our confidence in our abilities to make this society work, let alone to make Somalia or Bosnia

or Russia work, has been shaken. Maybe now that both of the great empires of Europe and the American century are coming to an end, we, the conquerors of nations, will rediscover the truth Paul knew way back there in the first century: when we are weak we are strong. God's power is made perfect in weakness. Through the conflict in our marriage, the conflict with our children, the chaos of our society, and the horrors of history, God will bring us fearsome blessings.

Let us pray that Paul was right – God's grace is sufficient for us. The power of Christ rests upon us in our own weakness. The power of God is loose in the world.

October 10, 1993

IMPROVISING

Our Gracious God,

Jewish Men used to pray,

“Thank God I was not born a Gentile or a woman.”

By today's standards one could not call them politically correct,
but by anyone's standards, they were honest.

If we were to update their prayer,

we might thank God that we were not born Iraqis or Kurds,
that we don't live in Bangladesh

or in a trailer park in a tornado-prone part of the United States.

Sitting here planning commencement and watching the dogwoods bloom
while reading this stuff in the papers
could throw a person into a state of cognitive dissonance,
as we intellectuals might say.

What is going on?

Why all the horror?

Not that we are expecting any answers.

Why did you create us with an unlimited capacity for questions
but an extremely limited ability to find answers?

Do you enjoy watching us name reality and make meaning?

Are we being graded on this?

If we are,

we trust you will take into consideration
that our lives are improvisational theater.

No rehearsals.

No retakes.

We are making it up as we go along.

You built us an interesting set,

but as a playwright and director,
you leave a lot to be desired.

Have mercy on us actors.

We're experimenting.

Amen.

May 3, 1991

TO DANCE AND TO WEEP

Luke 7:31-8:3

"To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another.

*'We played the flute for you, and
you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not weep.'*

For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children."

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet he would know what kind of woman this is who is touching him — that she is a sinner," Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." "A certain creditor has two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now, which of them will love him more?" Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You

did not anoint my head with ointment, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.” The he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

On Sundays, I think it is wonderful that Jesus was a friend of tax collectors and sinners, but once I leave the church doors, I’m not so sure. Why is Jesus forever taking up for the people who have been sinful and irresponsible and criticizing the ones who have been the most dedicated to high moral standards and the betterment of society? (That is who the Pharisees were in Jesus’ day.)

We know nothing about this woman who came to anoint Jesus except that she was a sinner from the city and that her gift to him was outrageously expensive. We know nothing about this woman, but we do know about irresponsible sexual behavior. We know a lot. We know about the hardships of children born to unmarried women, as one-third of American children are. We know about the high human and medical costs of sexually transmitted diseases. We know a lot about the suffering caused by disintegrating families. Can an extravagant gift or a bucketful of tears wipe out the devastation to individuals and to the social fabric caused by such irresponsible behavior? Jesus, if you really were a prophet (like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and even John the Baptist), you would not be accepting gifts from this woman. You would be denouncing everything she stands for.

And what about the tax collectors Jesus seemed to count as friends? Basically they were corrupt government officials who valued being rich more than they cared about their fellow citizens. They wanted to live well,

even at the expense of others. They cooperated with the Roman oppressors, which made them traitors to their nation. We know of people who would quickly sell out their own integrity if it meant a profit. We know about the damage done by corrupt and greedy people in government and business. Jesus, if you really were a prophet, you would say a lot less about forgiveness, and you would stop befriending these dregs of society. Jesus, if you were really a prophet, you wouldn't tell stories about a father who kills a fattened calf when his wayward son comes home after wasting his entire inheritance, the family's accumulated wealth, in riotous living – women, gambling, drinking, fine clothes.

Is it not time to kill the fattened calf for a lot of elder brothers and sisters who resisted the lures of the far country with its sins and pleasures? Is it not time to celebrate those dutiful ones who simply, day after day, did whatever needed doing for their families, their communities, their employers? Isn't it time to recognize the accomplishments of those who visited the nursing home, served the PTA, mowed a neighbor's yard, were Scout leaders, and in their quiet way lived lives obedient to God? That is, after all, the kind of people the Pharisees really were. They were greatly admired throughout the Near East for their high moral standards. Their ethical rigor seemed to be undermined by a Jesus who went around saying, "Your sins are forgiven; your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

Oh, Jesus, sins are not so easily canceled out. No, Jesus, we have to *live* with the decisions we've made, and not even you can deny the power of past sins over the present and the future. Doesn't that make sense? But I am haunted by these words:

To what shall I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not weep."

We dutiful ones, are we in danger of being better able to pass judgment on people, to evaluate what they need to work on, what decisions they had best make, than to dance with them or weep with them? Are we prone to becoming world weary?

I think this text stands as a warning to us. It isn't that we are doing anything wrong. It is what doing everything right may be doing to us. For

example, when the need to restructure the nation's welfare system is discussed, instead of formulating a thoughtful response on how to bring more people into the mainstream economically, do we find our blood pressure rising, our concern for the well-being of these poor evaporating in the heat of our anger toward them? We are in danger of no longer caring what happens to them so long as we don't have to finance it?

And when we hear again about wars in Rwanda, Bosnia, and the mess in Haiti, do we find our compassion diminishing? Why can't these people get along, and I certainly hope they don't expect the U.S. taxpayer and the U.S. military to intervene! If they want to kill each other, that's their problem.

And what about you who are dutiful alumnae? You give your money and your time unstintingly, but there are moments when you wonder why twenty percent are doing all the work around here. Why can't the rest of the people pitch in more? Why do they always call *me* when they want something done?

And isn't there often one sibling to whom the care of the aging parents falls and one child in the family who doesn't hesitate to ask for more or need more from the parents? We working mothers are especially vulnerable to this weariness. Research bears out that no one puts in more labor than we do – often at the expense of our own sleep. We're tired.

I don't think Simon the Pharisee was a bad man. He was just an incredibly responsible man. And, when he saw that old, shopworn woman of the streets come to Jesus and weep and anoint him with precious oil, all he saw was one more person who had not followed the rules and was consequently making the world a messier place for all of us. Why can't these people get it together? Why can't they be more responsible and do what they are supposed to?

Jesus was deeply moved; Simon was not. Simon was a man who had forgotten how to dance and how to weep. He was choking on his own goodness. Where did he go wrong? The woman who anointed Jesus did so out of gratitude; she gave just because she wanted to.

In contrast, everything Simon did, he did out of sense of obligation and duty. When he saw people who had failed to perform their absolute obligations, people who had broken the rules, he was resentful. He felt betrayed, let down. He saw God as the headmaster of a very strict school. Living under the rigorous rules and regulations was made bearable because

you knew exactly what they were, and the headmaster would reward those who obeyed and punish the disobedient.

But if the disobedient are simply forgiven, then there was no reward at all in having kept all the rules. You see, the Pharisees of whom Jesus spoke had not chosen their path in life out of love for God or love for other people. They had not chosen it because they believed that virtue is in its own reward, and that it is simply the best way to live a life. They chose their own path because they thought God would reward them and punish others. They chose it because it made them better than other people, top moral dogs, and they liked being on top. It brought them no intrinsic joy. They could no longer dance or weep.

What does this mean for you and me? It means that we (as individuals and as Americans) do not *have* to do anything about poverty, homelessness; we do not *have* to do anything about pollution; we do not *have* to do anything about the conflicts within our society or those abroad. All we have to do is live with the consequences of our decisions. We have to answer the question: What do we really want to do with our lives? What do we want for this country? What role do we want the U.S. to play in the world, and what will be the consequences of the choices we make? God has set us free. We are absolutely free to respond in any way we choose.

At your church, at Mary Baldwin College, you do not have to do one thing. You do not have to give a nickel or lift a finger. What role *do* you want to play, if any? What kind of church do you want to have? What kind of college do you want this to be? What mission, if any, do you want to be a part of? You are absolutely free to decide.

Ah, but for those of us who are mothers and fathers, what could Christian freedom mean to us? Being a parent means having narrower limits than most people have. But all of us have limits. Finally, though, we don't have to clean house or cook or do anything. We can stop. We can even run away from home. Sometimes knowing you *can* leave may be the only thing that enables you to stay with any sense of freedom and joy. It is the only thing that stands between a dutiful but deeply resentful person and one who has chosen one's way, and with all its difficulties can claim it, dance and weep.

I learned this about fifteen years ago. My husband and I were serving four small churches in an extremely remote part of West Virginia. It was not the fault of West Virginia or these people, but I felt lonely and

isolated. One day, when I could not stop crying, I realized that I had to get away for a while. I spent ten days visiting friends. The last night before I returned, I was staying with an old classmate from seminary. I told him my situation. He uttered no pious words; he didn't even talk about God. He just said, "Go home, pack up your things, and get out of there. It isn't good for Ron; it isn't good for you; what else do you need to know about it?"

Until then, I don't think I believed I had the freedom to leave. Realizing I could leave may be the only thing that kept me there another three and a half years. When things got bad, I told myself, "You *can* go. Yes, it will be hard and you will have to find another job. It may mean you will be out of the ministry permanently, but you don't *have* to stay. You can go."

Our text today ends with a list of women who followed Jesus and provided for him and his disciples out of their resources. They didn't have to support Jesus financially. Like the woman who anointed Jesus, they just wanted to. I'll bet these women still remembered how to dance and how to weep and saw in Jesus someone who still remembered too.

"For freedom Christ has set you free." Choose your way carefully, prayerfully, but *choose* it. May God bless you.

Amen.

May 5, 1994

DIVINE MADNESS

Our Gracious God,

This week we witnessed the end of the white rule in South Africa.

Nelson Mandela,

at 72, about to take on one of the toughest
political leadership jobs in the world,

Nelson Mandela danced in celebration,

danced before cameras
danced right in front of me in my kitchen.

On another liberation day

When the Hebrews escaped the slavery of Pharaoh

Miriam took tambourine in hand
and all the women went out after her dancing.

Nikos Kazantzakis's Zorba

danced in mourning the death of his son,
danced when his grand scheme to get rich crashed into a heap.

What about us?

Is there any bit of madness about us,
the kind that liberates?

Are there victories to celebrate?

Are there dark shadows to disperse?

This year we at Mary Baldwin

have certainly lived up to the old Chinese curse:
may you live in interesting times.

Grace us with a little divine madness.

Set us free.

Teach us to dance.

Amen.

May 6, 1994

GETTING TO THE HEART OF THIS LIFE

Luke 7: 18-23

*Go and tell John what you have seen and heard
the blind receive their sight
the lame walk
lepers are cleansed
and the deaf hear
the dead are raised up
the poor have good news preached to them
And blessed is he who takes no offense at me.*

Blessed is he who takes no offense? Why would anyone be offended?
the blind receive their sight
the lame walk
lepers are cleansed
and the deaf hear
the dead are raised up
the poor have good news preached to them

Why would John be *offended*? Can we figure this out?

John is in prison, and Herod will shortly execute him. Why is he in prison? Well, he is in prison because he criticized Herod's morality. And why did he do that? Because he believed that immorality was what was wrong with the world. People needed to become more moral.

If we had gone out into the wilderness to see John, we would have seen a man existing on locusts and wild honey – we're talking about grasshoppers – who never drank wine, and who, when the crowds gathered, said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who told you to escape from the wrath to come...If you don't repent, you will be like a tree that has bad fruit, you will be cut down and thrown into the fire." A simple, clear message. A much needed message. And people believed him. And they were baptized to be forgiven of their sins. He told them: "Don't lie. Don't steal. Don't commit violence. Give to those in need."

John called people to the highest morality, and he just didn't talk the talk, he walked the walk. And he was going to pay for it with his life.

He had been faithful to his mission. He had told people that when the Messiah came, he was going to separate the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff would be thrown into an unquenchable fire. The Messiah was really going to separate the good from the bad. But John had heard disturbing rumors about Jesus: a drunkard and a glutton, a friend of sinners – *a friend of sinners!* John didn't try to be their friend; he tried to be their prophet.

Maybe the rumors were wrong. Maybe Jesus wasn't really a glutton and a drunkard, but you had to question the judgment of a man who would allow such rumors to take hold. Wasn't it important to avoid even the appearance of wrongdoing? Surely the Messiah would be calling people to walk the straight and narrow and doing it himself. Jesus did talk about heaven, good fruit, just as John had talked about it. But it was not clear to John that this Jesus was the Messiah. So he sent people to ask. It wasn't idle curiosity. John was probably not capable of idle curiosity about anything. No, this was a life or death matter for John. The answer was important; he *had* to know. So his disciples stood before Jesus to ask, "Are you He who is to come?"

What was Jesus to say to them? It was a serious question being put to him by the greatest prophet of the age. John deserved an answer. And yet, John was probably going to be offended by that answer because John's ministry was to people who genuinely wanted to become better human beings, more obedient to the will of God, more morally upright. People didn't go out into the wilderness to be called a brood of vipers, to repent and be baptized if they did not intend to leave the river Jordan more determined and more committed followers of the way of God.

Jesus was different. Jesus didn't go out into the wilderness and wait for people to come to him. Jesus went from town to town. And almost no one ever came to Jesus and said, "I want to be more obedient to God. I want to be a better human being. I want to build a better world." No, Jesus' people said: "Heal me, Jesus, I can't see. Heal me, Jesus, I can't walk. My slave is dying; my daughter is dead. Do something Jesus; I'm in pain. Save me Jesus; I'm drowning. Here's my son, Jesus. He's possessed by a demon." If John's people are the dedicated, Jesus' people are the desperate.

In Jesus' time, illness was thought to be the result of sin; it was punishment from God. It was a moral problem, not merely a medical problem. So when it was said that Jesus healed people, to John's way of

thinking that was roughly equivalent to Jesus forgiving their sins and suspending their punishment from God. John just could not see any evidence that Jesus' people grasped what it meant to be truly repentant of their sins and to commit themselves to doing better from here on out.

John's followers brought to the Jordan River their best selves. Jesus' people came with their broken selves. John's people made public confessions of their sin. Jesus' people just asked to get out from under their pain. John's people had high potential. Jesus' people had no potential. They had run out of solutions, run out of ideas, had no where to go.

John armed people to go to battle against evil; John was their general. Jesus seemed to be moving through the field of battle like a medic, picking up the casualties.

John sent them into battle. Jesus took them after they were defeated.

John's people believed in self-help. Jesus' people believed they were beyond help.

John's people had been overcome by their thirst for righteousness. Jesus' people had been overcome by their sorrows and suffering they couldn't fix. John's people had direction. Jesus' people were lost.

What could Jesus say to John? How could he explain? How could he defend himself to John? And so he quoted Isaiah because it was John's favorite prophet too. In a sense, Jesus and John were both followers of Isaiah. He said:

*Just tell him what you've seen and heard:
the blind receive their sight
the lame walk
lepers are cleansed
and the deaf hear
the dead are raised up
the poor have good news preached to them*

"And," John, "blessed are you if you can accept this without being offended."

What about us? Are we offended? Had we rather be seen with John's followers with their commitment and dedication? Or do we dare allow ourselves to be numbered among those sad, suffering people Jesus

ministered to who had run out of options and righteousness and the will and way to help themselves.

Is the church the church of John the Baptist, dedicated to right ethics and moral improvement? That's not bad; John was a great and good man. But that simply isn't the church of Jesus Christ. And we need to be more honest with ourselves about it. The church of Jesus Christ is where you come when you've lost your way, when the sorrows of life threaten to engulf you, when you've failed, failed to live up to your own hopes and ideals.

The church of Jesus Christ is where the casualties of life gather. The church of Jesus Christ is where you go when you've got no place to go, and lo and behold, you discover it is home.

The church of Jesus Christ is also the place where the power of God is unleashed in ways even John could not imagine. The church of Jesus Christ is where people are set free and healed and redeemed. And the Church of Jesus Christ is the one that reaches out to people who are suffering *no matter what the cause*.

There is a quote from Johann Sebastian Bach that I like. It is about music. He said, "Music is a gift of God to the children of God in the midst of their sorrows, to give them a joy worthy of their destiny." It would be a good definition of the church as well. Church, the Church of Jesus Christ, is a gift of God to us, the children of God, in the midst of our sorrows to give us a joy worthy of our destiny.

May God bless the people of God in this place.

October 13, 1991

IN WINTERTIME

Our Gracious God,

It is in this season of the year that people of faith
tell the stories of times
when your presence was visible among us.

We are invited to believe that
good is more powerful than evil
and that we are not alone.

In the wintertimes of our lives
when the days are short
and the cold penetrates our very bones,
at least give us the warmth of a fire to huddle by
until spring comes again,
and we can emerge into the sunshine of springtime hope.

Don't hide your face.

Reach out to us with that ancient message:
Fear not; there is good news; there is joy.

Amen.

December 8, 1994

STRANGERS AT THE DINNER TABLE

Deuteronomy 10:12-19

So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? Only to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments.

Luke 24:28-30

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

Luke has paraded a cast of strangers through his gospel beginning with the shepherds who make their appearance in the Christmas story and continuing right to the crucifixion in which Jesus has a conversation with the criminals being executed on either side and promises one of them a place with him in paradise.

No one is more interested in the stranger or outsider than Luke. So it is in keeping with the rest of Luke's gospel that at the resurrection we are given not a detailed account of Jesus' appearance to Peter, Andrew, James, or John, but this story of Jesus' meeting Cleopas and an unnamed person.

Who in the world is Cleopas? Luke has never mentioned him before, and he is never mentioned again in Luke or in Acts. As if to underscore Luke's concern with the stranger, he tells us his tale using a stranger. Then he turns the tables on us and claims that the one who is a stranger to us, Cleopas, thought Jesus was a stranger – as if a resurrection story weren't weird enough on its own.

Here we need some of the music of Francis Thompson McKay to set the mood of despair and fear and strangeness in this story. The ground shifts beneath us, and nothing is familiar anymore. That is the disturbing setting as we join two people on the road; Jerusalem and its horrors to their back, they make their way toward Emmaus. We do not know who they are, or why

they are on the road. Nothing has prepared us for these two, and nothing prepared them for the stranger they meet.

Why does Luke insist that it was the ones who urged the stranger to eat with them who got to see the risen Lord? Why this fascination of Luke's with the stranger? And why does the stranger turn up in Jewish law (and in the book of Ruth)?

The communities out of which Luke's gospel and Deuteronomy come had very limited resources for generosity toward people beyond their own group. The communities had little or nothing to gain from kindness to outsiders beyond proselytizing them, and there is nothing to indicate that this kindness was thought to be a marketing tool. I understand warning against outsiders, regulations about contacts with outsiders, but what is this concern for people who are not part of the group and for whom it would seem the group has no responsibility?

Higher education has always expressed an interest in teaching students to love the stranger. Today we talk about diversity. Before diversity there was pluralism. Before pluralism there was brotherhood. And before I ever heard the word brotherhood, the church taught me to sing:

Jesus loves the little children,
All the children of the world –
Red and yellow, black and white,
They are precious in his sight.
Jesus loves the little children of the world.

It all adds up to high-sounding language about embracing strangers, strange people, and in higher education that includes not just classmates and professors and the like. It includes all the books we read, written by strangers who through the magic of the written word come to visit us, talk to us, share their vision with us. (I sometimes have an image in my mind of the library as a city animal shelter or S.P.C.A. And all of the books are cute little puppies and kittens with front paws stretched up and poking through the wire of their little cages, their noses pressed to the bars, wagging their tails and saying to us, "Pick me out! I want to talk to you. I've got secrets to tell you. Please, please take me home.") In colleges and universities, we talk a lot about diversity and how glorious it all is, but I don't think students much believe us. And I think I know why.

What most people are longing for is not diversity but friends, community, someone or something to belong to. We are trying to find our place, our niche, and it isn't always easy. We're searching for kindred spirits, soul mates, people who understand us, love and support us, share our deepest longings. You hardly ever hear someone say, "What I think I need is to spend more time with strangers." In a country as pluralistic as the United States, we can get to feeling exhausted from being asked to listen to the incessant demands of so many groups, so many voices, so many points of view. It is overwhelming.

My inclination is to cultivate family relationships and the affection of a few close friends. Doesn't it make a lot of sense that I can best serve the world by creating my own little garden of peace and sanity? In a crazy world like ours, maybe the best I can do is carve out a sanctuary from all the chaos. Can't I do the most good among people I really understand? Yes, it is true that the inner cities are awful and thousands are starving in Somalia, but the better part of wisdom is being able to separate the things you can do from the things you can't do anything about. What could be more ridiculous than people like us wringing our hands over problems that are indeed terrible, but simply are not ours? Even Jesus did not try to solve the Roman occupation problem or heal all the sick in the first century Palestine.

But I am haunted by these stories of the stranger. What do they have to do with me who is about three hours from a summer vacation in which I just want to visit family and friends, plant some nice flowers, and curl up on the sofa with a few good books? What do they have to do with you? Sally Buckner, a North Carolina poet, wrote a poem that helped me get at the answer to this question. One Southern woman is speaking to another as they wait for the biscuits to come out of the oven for Sunday dinner. The speaker isn't educated, but she has taken in strangers, she has listened to them very well indeed. Listen to her.

SUNDAY DINNER

Everything done but the biscuits? I'll just set down.
Got right unsettled at Sunday school this morning.
Miss Lucy was in rare form. Said, "Life is a gift,"
Miss Lucy said, the sun plunging in through the window,
white-hot rays drawing sweat through my pores the way

a claw hammer pulls raw nails right out of a plank.
“Life is a gift from the Lord, and we ought to accept it,
hold it precious, rejoice, and praise God for it,
praise with our deeds as well as our words and our songs.”

And while she was carrying on, I thought of them people
I seen in a copy of Life – though to my way of thinking,
They was hardly worth living: hand-to-mouth existence,
scratching food for a family of nine or ten
out of less than an acre of near-bout pure-tee rock,
barely pulling through one year to the next –
Well, some of them didn’t: four young’uns already dead.
The mama was scrawny and coughing – and no wonder:
holes in the roof, dirt floor, always fighting rats;
the man, his eyes was all hollow, like someone had burnt
the sockets out. And I thought to myself, if life
is a gift to them folks, it’s like the time Aunt Emma
give her best chocolate devil’s food fudge cake
to Cousin Jason, him sick with the diabetes.

So I said as much, and Miss Lucy, she perked up,
shivering all them curls, her ear bobs jangling;
“You just never know; it don’t take riches to live
With joy and praise; why these simple folk delight
In simple things; some ways they’re closer to God
Without all the distractions we call necessary
To our way of life.” Well, then I recalled them kids
From Cambodia, on t-v the night-before-last,
Hungry since God-knows-when. Miss Lucy was right,
They won’t distracted too easy; flies was crawling
Right on their noses and foreheads, and they didn’t lift
One toothpick-finger to shoo them; just laid there quiet,
Their bellies swell like they’d swallowed my prize pumpkins,
Wide, dark eyes staring empty at the camera;
But they didn’t appear to be overflowing with praise.
And I mentioned them. Then Miss Lucy’s eyes
Flickered like green fire. “But they’re still clinging

To life, now aren't they, Horace? That precious gift!
And if you asked, I'll bet they'd say—“

And my mind wandered then to Aunt Beulah's boy,
Still in diapers at – must be near-to-forty;
Not even crawling. Uncle Ephraim thought
That boy was sent to them as a special cross,
A burden that they sure-God ought to bear.
So the boy stayed with them until Uncle Ephraim died,
And two weeks later Aunt Beluah had a stroke,
And they took the boy away. Three years ago,
I went to the place to see him – strapped in a basket,
A nurse shaving and cleaning this grown-man baby,
And all the time him moaning like a cow in labor;
And if Miss Lucy asked him – well, all he'd do
Is keep moaning low, like that, I reckon:
Didn't sound to me like no hymn of thanksgiving.

But I looked at Miss Lucy standing there in the sunlight,
All shining, singing how we ought to shout our praises,
Ought to bend our knees, ought to bow – so I didn't say nothing,
Just thought to myself, maybe we ought not to
Say “ought” so much.

Well, are the biscuits ready?

Lord, those look downright edible; I still say
You could bring home the bluest ribbon they give
At the fair come next September. And the snap beans
Smell extra good; you season them in ham liquor?
I thought so. Awful good beans; awful good ham;
Mighty good year for farmers. You settle down.
Bert, you say grace: we got lots to be thankful for.

Folks, we got a lot of people we need to listen to. Some of them sit
in books on the library shelves. Some of them talk to us through television
and magazines. Many are desperately poor. We live in a world in which the
richest twenty percent of the nations have over eighty percent of the wealth

and the poorest twenty percent have about one percent of the wealth (GNP, world trade, savings, investment, etc.).

We need to pay attention to the world around us. Voices from the past, voices from the present and, yes, voices of generations not yet born. Attention must be paid. I don't much like listening to strangers and taking them to my dinner table. They can make me feel inept and incompetent, ignorant. They can make me feel as though I have to justify my way of life, defend my values and decisions. I hate that. I can't take home all the strangers. But let's take some of them home to dinner anyway. And let's listen real close when they speak. And tell them about ourselves, too. It's an act of faith in the Creator and an act of love for everything God created. We can't ever possess all truth. But let's look for it anyhow. The search will enlarge our spirits. It will liberate us from ignorance. We'll be surprised at the difference it will make.

Finally, this isn't so much about duty, obligation, and guilt. It is about living with the doors and windows open instead of locked up in a fortress of our own making. It's about coming downstairs and meeting the company when our divine parent calls upstairs to us, hiding in our rooms playing with our toys. There's a party, and please come down to be introduced. There are some interesting people to meet. Cleopas took a stranger to dinner and met up with Jesus. Luke keeps insisting that we will have adventures just as grand if we dare. He thinks that's what it means to follow the Jesus who said,

"Foxes have their holes. Birds have their nests. But the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

But we're not foxes. We're not birds, and we're meant for bigger worlds than holes and nests. We're meant to be as close to as wide a variety of other lives and struggles as we possibly can. Don't miss out on real living.

"Now Bert, you say grace:
We got lots to be thankful for."

"Sunday Dinner" is from *Strawberry Harvest*; Poems by Sally Buckner, St. Andrews Press, Laurinburg, NC 28352, 1986

May 24, 1992

THANKSGIVING

Our Gracious God,

'Tis the season to be thankful.

And we are.

It would be easy to make a list

of all the things for which we are grateful.

Just having a warm place to sleep

three meals a day

flush toilets

and soft, absorbent toilet paper

puts us ahead of many of the world's people.

We know we take too much for granted,

but perhaps that isn't our biggest problem.

Something else is amiss that can't be fixed

by counting our blessings.

We don't want to become one of those

dewy-eyed, eternally-cheerful, ever-smiling optimists

who exhort us to look on the sunny side.

Deliver us from the hands of the cheerleaders,

especially before our first cup of coffee in the morning.

However, we know what it is for a

Holy Gratitude

to sweep over us.

Suddenly life seems trustworthy

even though we know its sorrows.

We become gracious and merciful.

But as quickly as we are possessed by this mysterious spirit,

it can vanish,

and no amount of moral effort seems to resurrect it.

This Thanksgiving season we want it back.

We want the spirit of gratitude for the real world

that speaks to the real suffering and injustice.

A paradox, surely.
But a contradiction? An impossibility?

For us, yes.
For you, no. No.

God of Mercy
 who causes dry bones to live
 calls forth the dead
 and gives power to the faint
be gracious to us.
Make us truly grateful
 that we may go out in joy, and be led forth in peace.

November 22, 1991

LOSING HEART

Luke 18:1-8

Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

When I was looking for a text for this Sunday, I was stopped by the words, "not lose heart." It seemed to me that a lot of people I know were having to fight awfully hard not to lose heart. A colleague of mine said to me recently, "Life should not be this hard!" I had to agree, but it didn't change anything. When I ran across this parable, I wondered, is there anything in this story that will help us?

At first glance the parable seems as likely to make us feel guilty as to inspire us with hope. We "ought to pray and not lose heart." The elect "cry to him day and night." So I started wondering if I've ever been praying long enough, hard enough, frequently enough. Am I doing it right? But the story was never meant to produce guilt; it was meant to produce hope. If it is making us feel guilty, then we are not hearing it right.

The parable also made me start wondering about God. Does this God really need for me to plead and beg? Is that what God requires before any action will be taken on my behalf? What about the God who has all the hairs on my head numbered . . . the God who knows when even a sparrow falls? Where is that God? But again, the story was meant to produce hope, not to inform me of some Divine Red Tape we must deal with before God will help us. If the parable sounds more like bad news than good, maybe we aren't hearing it right. Maybe the story isn't about God at all;

maybe it is about us. Might the key to the parable be the woman, the widow? What does she know that I don't know?

The woman in the story has an adversary. In Luke the adversary, the enemy, is not someone who doesn't like you. The woman is not worried about being overcharged for plumbing. The adversary is Satan. The adversary is everything that destroys hope and life. It is the one who tempted Jesus in the wilderness, the one who sent Judas on his mission, the one who entrapped Peter and got him to deny he ever knew Jesus. The adversary causes illness, death, disasters outside our control, and temptations that beset us, that make it difficult to do the right thing or even know what the right thing is.

We do not lose heart because we are weak and pitiful, bad or misinformed. It is that the enemy is so strong. Life is hard even if we have all the things they say we need: food, shelter, clothing, education. Even under the best of circumstances. It batters at us and at our world. We are up against the adversary and so are the rich, the poor, the starving and the overweight, the young, the old, the sick, the well, and so are the South Africans and the Nicaraguans, the Iranians and the Russians. We are all threatened with destruction.

The widow in the story knows what she is up against. She is a widow, and thus has no one to speak for her. She knows she cannot deal with this by herself. She doesn't underestimate the enemy or overestimate herself. The widow goes for help. She calls on the unrighteous judge to vindicate her, to come in with his power on her side. Maybe the widow is on to something.

Do we heap blame and guilt on ourselves and other people instead of simply admitting that even under the best of circumstances life is difficult? We say, "Yes, my life is hard, but I should be grateful for what I have. Look at all those people who are worse off than I am. I must be a terrible person to be so ungrateful." (I know there is some truth to that, but it just never seems to help me at all. Does it help you?) Or, when we really fall flat on our faces, when we fail and it is our fault, instead of taking responsibility and going on from there, we punish ourselves with self-doubt. We accuse ourselves of not being wise enough ("I should have known better"), persistent enough ("If only I had stayed with it; I guess I was just lazy"), skillful enough ("I'll never be any good at this.") Of course we have responsibility. But who, and what, do we think we are up against? Is

punishing ourselves making us better able to fight the adversary, or is it simply a tool of the adversary to make us weaker, make us lose heart, make us even less effective at fighting the evil and destruction in ourselves and in our world?

Sometimes we don't punish ourselves; we punish others. Again, I'm not talking about the simple assessment of responsibility that helps toward solving problems. I'm talking about imagining that if only, if only those people were different, evil would be conquered. "My problems all go back to my mother. If she had been a better mother, I wouldn't be in this mess." "It is all my boss. If he would change, everything would be wonderful." "The trouble with this country is the liberals, the conservatives, the poor people, the rich people, the politicians, the unions. If it weren't for them, we wouldn't have crime and the deficit, and welfare fraud, and you name it." (I am reminded that the Jews in Jesus' day thought that if only they could get rid of all the Romans, all their problems would be solved.) Is it possible that this approach is yet another tool of the adversary to turn us against one another? Is it possible that by putting the blame "out there," we are not simply analyzing the problem; we are trying to vindicate ourselves. We refuse to admit the kind of adversary both we and our opponents are up against. Does blaming them make us better able to fight the powers of evil, or is it simply a tool of the adversary to make us weaker, make us lose heart?

The Jesus who faced the powers of evil in the wilderness, who fasted for forty days and was tempted, that Jesus was not a Pollyanna; that Jesus knew the power of evil. That Jesus knew what we were up against. All of us. That Jesus knew the danger of losing heart. So he told us to pray, not because God needs it but because we need it, because the alternative may be hating ourselves or hating others. He told us to pray because he had done it himself.

In the Memphis paper I ran across a story of another widow who, I think, captured the meaning of this parable as well as anyone. Her name is Reba Moody; she is sixty-two years old. She grew up in Tupelo, Mississippi, was the first of ten children, attended Rust College, and married at the age of twenty-three. She had no children until she was twenty-eight, but over the next twelve years, she had eleven.

One Sunday morning in June, 1965, Reba Moody got a phone call at work at St. Joseph's Hospital. Her husband had been injured in a car

crash and had been taken to John Gaston Hospital (the black hospital). She tells the story this way: "I got there and looked at him. Deep in my heart I wanted him to live, but deep down in my heart I knew he wouldn't. I was at the bed when he died three days later." When her husband died, Reba Moody was seven months pregnant with her eleventh child. She said, "I was standing there expecting, seven months. I said to God, 'Oh Lord, I can't take care of those little children by myself.'"

Reba Moody knew what she was up against. She says now, "People don't know what it takes to raise a family. I have worked day and night and have done without things. I have never got food stamps. I have never got welfare since my husband died." She did have small amounts coming in from Social Security and from her husband's veteran's benefits. And she had four friends (they were named in the article) who helped her clothe the children, handle emergencies, and even helped the children find jobs. All the children have attended college except a son who died at the age of fourteen of a heart problem.

The youngest son, Kenneth Moody, is a senior and a basketball player at Memphis State University. Last February when Memphis State played their last home game of the season, Kenneth Moody escorted his mother to center court for a ceremony honoring him and a fellow senior. Reba Moody said about that night, "People think when I walked out on that court I was crying tears of rejoicing because I was with Kenneth. It wasn't that. God had let me know that I had done what I said I couldn't do. Every one of them went to college. I told God I couldn't do it, but he showed me I could."

Like the widow in the story, Reba Moody told God what she was up against. Tell God what we're up against. Tell God what the world is up against. Say it eloquently or say it plain. Shake your fist if you feel like it (those Old Testament Jews did a lot of that), or cry, or throw things. Shout it or whisper it; style doesn't count for a thing. You weren't made for prayer. Prayer was made for you.

May 24, 1987

FOR HEROES

Our Gracious God,

Be with this gathering of heroes,
for we *are* heroes.

We go forth every morning
to face bravely the realities of life and death
despite our being a puny match for either.

We have thousands of pounds of books,
yet we have not solved the mystery of our existence.

We plant seeds,
though we know not to whom belongs the harvest.

We do battle with our Goliaths
as surely as did David.

Give us victory over the giants that threaten our existence.

Speak to the demons that haunt us.

Travel with us through the wilderness
no matter how long or difficult the journey.

Amen.

Especially for Bonnie Hohn
Sally Hohn
and their mother,
three authentic heroes.

January 27, 1987

HOMECOMING

Philippians 4:10-13

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 23:44-46

It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Having said this, he breathed his last.

Luke 24:39-41

"Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything to eat?"

Homecoming is a time of story telling. Sometimes we see people we haven't seen in years, and they want to know what has happened to us. And we want to know what has happened to them. Do you ever wonder what they are leaving out? I do. (I guess it is because I know what I am leaving out of my story.)

We tend to emphasize the good things when we tell our stories. We sometimes tell about sad or difficult happenings as well: the death of

someone in the family, serious illness, a troubled child, loss of a job. But I always try to leave the impression that, despite my hardships, I am handling it well. Triumph of the human spirit and all. I *know* I'd better not dwell too long on the details of my misfortunes. You have to act as though you are just supplying information – certainly *not* soliciting pity. And, of course, you are really just fine. The goal is for the other person to feel sorer for you than you feel for yourself. Have you mastered this, the brave, sincere, stoic demeanor?

Now I know the earlier Christians lived in a radically different time and place, but I really have to question how they chose to tell their story. They had so much to emphasize that was positive when they told the story about Jesus: Jesus the teacher (Socrates and the Buddha's followers did that), Jesus the prophet (Isaiah and Jeremiah's followers chose the prophetic role), Jesus the healer, Jesus the exorcist and miracle worker, Jesus the liberator (Moses), even Jesus the resurrected One. All those roles of Jesus were there, but the central story for the early Christians was the story of the crucifixion. They chose as their symbol the cross. The central sacrament was the Mass, the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, which is a recapitulation of the crucifixion. When you go into a Roman Catholic Church, the Stations of the Cross are what you see along the walls of the sanctuary. Don't you think this is a little odd?

You may be thinking they focused on the cross because they thought Jesus' death made forgiveness and eternal life possible. That's what students in New Testament tell me the first week. But we Christians have given Jews a bad press. They *already* believed in a merciful and forgiving God. Read Hosea. You won't find a more eloquent parable of forgiveness anywhere. And the Pharisees *already* believed in eternal life. The Jews didn't *need* to have a crucified God/Christ to get either forgiveness or eternal life. So why did they hold up the cross as the center of faith?

We've seen so many beautiful crosses done by so many fine artists, heard the cross spoken of by so many poets and prophets and preachers, that the impact is blunted. The cross was just the method of execution by the state for non-Roman citizens accused of crimes. That's all. Imagine elevating the electric chair to a holy symbol. Imagine a religious group choosing it as their mark of faith, creating a sacrament of an electrocution. Students find that horrifying, bordering on blasphemy, but that is precisely what the early Christians did with the cross. Why? Could it be that when

they saw the *suffering* Jesus they said: "That's like me. There he is rejected, an outcast, suffering when he didn't deserve it." The crucifixion was where his story matched their own. Mostly they weren't great teachers or prophets or healers. They had not come back from the dead. But many of them were from the edges and bottom of their society. They knew what it was to be shunned or to suffer. They claimed that good man on the cross as God's own and their own.

We are leery of people who want to make a religion out of their suffering. We know the dangers of wallowing in the gratifying despair of martyrdom. We know the shadow side of a people focusing on how unjustly they have been treated. We think that it isn't so much what happens to a person but how that person deals with the difficulties of life that really counts. We don't think like the early Christians. We aren't like them. They wrote the story of his suffering almost as if it were their own. The Jesus they told about, even as he appeared as the resurrected one, still had nail holes in his hands and feet. That's how they knew it was really Jesus. They saw his wounds, scars, marks of his suffering. But what does that have to do with us? We're not outcasts.

Last January, I was out climbing these hills at Mary Baldwin trying to sort out some very modern suffering of my own. My problems bore almost no resemblance to those of the early Christians. Suddenly it hit me. They believed that God can transform into a blessing the suffering that threatens to destroy you. They believed the weakness you have – the quality that *you* think is the worst thing about you – is that which God can transform into your greatest source of wisdom and strength. They believed that the tragedy that makes you question whether there is a God at all – in that tragedy God is prepared to rip away the veil and allow you to see God's presence in a way never before possible. They turned the stigma of the cross – the shame, the shunning, the evil, the tragedy – into the stigmata, the sign of God's holiness and power and good let loose in the world.

As far as I know, no other religion deals with suffering as Christianity does. All have something to say about it, chiefly how to avoid it and how to endure it when it is unavoidable, but no world religion or philosophy except Christianity tries to elevate suffering to the Holy Mountain on which one meets God or tries to turn a stigma into a stigmata. Nobody else says that in the midst of suffering the veil separating you from God is torn in two.

I cannot ask you to believe this. In a way it is unbelievable. There is very little evidence to support it. You and I see people destroyed by suffering all the time. Growing up in an inner city in America is more likely to leave you damaged than to make you stronger and wiser. Children who are abused are more likely to turn into abusers than into models of humanity. What I think we should be doing is fighting misery every day in every way we can just as Jesus went out to heal and restore brokenness wherever he found it. I can ask you (and me) to fight evil and injustice and hunger and war and misery and suffering, but I cannot ask you to believe this God-embedded-in-suffering business. Fortunately, you don't have to.

You know that apple didn't fall on Sir Isaac Newton's head because he believed in gravity. He believed in gravity because he got knocked in the head with an apple. Christians didn't encounter the transforming power of God in suffering and in the cross because they believed in it. They believed in the transforming power of God because it happened to them. All we can do is look out for it.

Just when you think real happiness can never be yours again, you may be overcome with the peace of God Paul talked about. (Nobody was more surprised to find peace than Paul. It was no moral achievement or self help project. It was a gift.) Just when you are overwhelmed by terror, don't be surprised if you are overwhelmed by grace. Just when you can see nothing good, watch for the sudden appearance of God. Just when you feel most betrayed and forsaken, the veil that has separated you from the holy may be ripped in two. Just when you think you will never stop bleeding from your wounds, it may be that those very wounds are transformed into reservoirs of strength, and living signs of the presence of God.

And if it should happen to you, smile. Laugh. You will be brothers and sisters under the skin with an assorted band of peasants and outcasts who walked the earth Jesus walked, who discovered the secrets of the cross. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

PERSPECTIVES

Our Gracious God,

When we were children,
and the terrors of night or day scared us,
some loving person would say,
“Don’t be afraid. Everything will be all right.”

In one sense, that was a lie.
In the short run, everything is not going to be all right.
For 131 people on a routine flight from Chicago to
Pittsburgh, everything is not going to
be all right.

Anything can happen and often does.
But is there any sense in which our reassuring mothers and fathers
were right?

In some ultimate, cosmic sense,
is everything going to be all right?

Most religions would have it so.

But for us immersed up to our eyeballs
in this world and its politics, its immediacy,
the promise that in the end everything is going to be all right can
seem remote, unhelpful, and possibly pure illusion.

We daughters and sons of the earth, “a little worn and ragged but alive,”
need to be assured as surely as we did in childhood.

Give us the peace that comes from having the long view
and the energy to do what needs
to be done in the present.

We need the perspectives of life viewed from the mountaintop
and in the trenches.

Give us that, and may your spirit be with us and light our way.

Amen.

September 9, 1994

Ideas contained in this prayer are from *A Rumor of Angels* by Peter L. Berger

CALLING DOWN FIRE AND OTHER GOOD SOLUTIONS

Luke 9: 46-56

An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

John answered, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he does not follow with us." But Jesus said to him, "Do not stop him; for whoever is not against you is for you."

When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of Samaritans to make ready for him; but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

"Lord, do you want us to call down fire on them?"

(Can you do this? Does it work?) What a satisfying option! To know that you are in the right. To know that they are in the wrong. To be able to call upon the power of Almighty God to prove it and instantly clean up the situation. It is a seductive desire that I think I understand. It has the same appeal as the myth of the good sheriff in a tough Western town. He comes in and cleans up the place, chasing off or killing all the outlaws and criminals and establishing law and order.

What about the "Dirty Harry" movies? And, of course, we can't forget "Rambo." But they are movies that appeal more to men than to women. We have "Thelma and Louise," and even "Fried Green Tomatoes" has a rather satisfying killing of an evil man. His body is barbecued and served up to unsuspecting people. I sat in the theater with the deep satisfaction that justice had been done; yes, the villain deserved to be barbecued.

In real life there is Saddam Hussein. And those who terrorize our cities. And the car jackers who dragged a woman entrapped by her seatbelt until her body was torn to pieces. “Shall we call down fire on them?” For God’s sake, for our sake, for justice’s sake, yes – call down fire.

Derrick Bell, formerly on the faculty of Harvard Law School and now at N.Y.U., has written a book entitled, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. He uses allegory, fables, and dialogue to get at what he sees as the truth about racism in America. One fable is the tale of the Space Traders.

The Space Traders are creatures from another planet who offer the United States the solution to all its economic problems and its environmental ills in exchange for one thing – its black population, which would be carried off into an unknown vault in outer space. In his fable, the deal is struck. Bell’s point is the persistence of racism, and his fable makes that point chillingly. But it may also point to another truth – the seductive appeal of the Big Solution. What if, instead of African-Americans, it were citizens of Nevada, or all the left-handed people, or everyone over sixty years of age? Would the deal to end economic and environmental problems still have appeal?

Have you ever been in a situation when you were so weary, so exhausted from dealing with persistent problems that a big solution seemed to be the only thing that would help? No more small steps. No more little improvements. Just fix it, God. Fix it, somebody, please. “Lord, shall we call down the fire on them?”

I don’t think the disciples meant to be vindictive. It is just that they had a dream. They thought they would be fighting on God’s side. They wanted to be a force for good in the world, to accomplish something, to be great in the eyes of God, to be the ones bringing in the kingdom of God. But their dream wasn’t turning out quite as they envisioned it when they started out.

They wanted to be great, but when Jesus spoke of greatness, he put a child in their midst. A child! The great one is the one who welcomes a child. Now children in Pampers ads, cereal commercials, ads for carpets that won’t stain, and children in Sunday school pictures with Jesus are cute and well behaved and clean. Real children are another story entirely. Real children are messy, immature; they cry and don’t always do as they are told. They are almost never found in the halls of power. Cabinet meetings, the

Senate, the House of Representatives – no children; NFL teams – no children; offices, corporations, university libraries, the floor of the New York Stock Exchange – no children.

The key to greatness: children – women’s work! What a thing to say to twelve men! People today don’t much believe it, and I doubt they did either. Advice to be “the least” doesn’t make a lot of sense in any age. This was not a part of the dream of the disciples when they heard about the kingdom of God. Kingdoms have royal courts, and those close to the king have very real power. They are not “the least among people.” They had not risked everything they had and everything they were to be “the least.” And now here they were, having risked all only to encounter some unknown exorcist who had never been called by Jesus as they had, who didn’t even know Jesus, who was using his name, acting as if he were a member of the inner circle when he clearly was not. And Jesus refused to do anything at all about the situation.

This is what the disciples sacrificed for? Some two-bit pretender could horn in on their territory, their claims in the Kingdom of God, their dreams of being the leaders in a new age God was bringing forth? So by the time the entourage arrived at the Samaritan village, it didn’t take too much rejection to get them to propose a drastic solution – call down fire. This will prove that God is serious and will settle once and for all who is on the Lord’s side. It probably would have done wonders for their evangelistic efforts in the next few villages. Word would have gotten around about the consequences of rejecting Jesus. Yes, by all means, call down fire. But Jesus says no. And he just goes to the next village. The only big solution he ever engaged in was his own death.

His disciples weren’t anxious to follow his example on that one. It wasn’t a part of the dream, the vision of life with God in which, in exchange for service to God, you had the power of God available to overcome the opposition, to defeat the enemies, to solve the problems, even to call down fire if that’s what it took.

What kind of solution is “they went on to the next village?” It is no solution at all for those who continue to hold onto the dream that just around the corner is a time when the problems I have now will be solved, and there won’t be anymore to replace them. It is no solution at all for those who want God to be the source of the Big Solution that will fix things once and for all. But for those who understand rightly, those seven

words, "They went on to the next village," are filled with hope.

They speak of the presence of a God in the world that does not seek to destroy even those who reject the divine will for a season. They speak of a God who loves this world in all of its imperfection and messiness and even evil, and is prepared to give us a spirit that can love it too. They speak of a God who gives courage to the fainthearted in the worst of times so that life can go on.

They went on to another village.

They went on . . .

Most of the little miracles that happen all around are done through people who, with God's help, go on. This college is surely one of those miracles. Mary Julia Baldwin and Agnes McClung together knew what it was to go on. There must have been moments when they wondered how they would continue. It would have been sensible to shut the doors. The other institutions in town were doing so. And the problems of the school did not magically get solved with the end of the Civil War. There were no Big Solutions on the horizon for Mary Julia Baldwin or the institution she guided. Not in her lifetime. Not in ours.

Mary Baldwin College and a whole host of people have kept this place, day-by-day, task-by-task, dollar-by-dollar. They did so because they loved the place, loved learning, loved life itself. They could not have kept going had they merely been in love with their *own* dreams for Mary Baldwin College. People in love with their own dreams will call down fire upon those who thwart them. People in love with their own dreams run the risk of succumbing to despair when the dream goes unfulfilled or even when their dream is fulfilled, but the satisfaction is not so great as they thought. No, the people who make the contributions to this world, who survive and even find joy are people who love life itself, who love the world with all its craziness and suffering and fallenness even more than they love their own dreams.

We come today to rededicate Miller Chapel. Do you have any idea how many chapels have been built at Mary Baldwin in imaginations of friends and alumnae, faculty and staff? If all the chapels that have been dreamed up since the old chapel was razed could suddenly pop up out of the earth, this campus would be full of chapels. Two of them before Miller

actually made it into drawings. None of these chapels will ever exist except in the mind's eye. This beautiful chapel does exist. And it is just right, just exactly what is needed.

It was the gift of Peggy Hitchman and her family that made this chapel possible. Peggy and I have talked, and she has given me a stern warning not to run on about how great her contribution and how wonderful a person she is. We are both Presbyterians and Calvinists, and so we understand that for a Presbyterian such a display would be unseemly, theologically incorrect, and a sin of pride for which we would both have to answer on the Last Day. So I won't do that. It would also drastically oversimplify the facts.

The truth about this chapel is that it is the fruit of failure as well as success. It is embedded in the human condition in all its vices and virtues, its sin and salvation. And that is exactly as it should be, because that is exactly where Jesus of Nazareth, God-in-Christ, spent his time on earth, close to real people of all sorts and conditions with their messy lives and mixed motives.

Jesus and the disciples went on to another village; now it is time for us to go on, to grab hold of life, to push back the forces of suffering and pain in the world whenever and wherever we can. To dream, yes, but to love God's world and God's people even more than we love our own dreams.

The United States is in a difficult time. Seventy-five percent of the people say they do not like the direction of the country. There is the danger of despair – giving up on the cities, giving up on good public education, on homelessness and AIDS. The dangers of giving up on our problems and retreating into private life and private religion are great. The dangers of turning to the Big Solution are also great; we know what happened in Germany in the 1930's.

To get us through, it will take people like us to steer this nation away from the dangers of despair and indifference on one side and calling down fire on the other. It will take going on day-by-day, task-by-task, doing God's work in the world God loves.

May God bless us as we go. And may God's presence always be in this place to encourage the fainthearted and send them on their way to serve.

EPIPHANIES

Our Gracious God,

We pause to speak with you and listen for you,
but we confess that a sense of the holy, a sense of awe,
is hard to come by
in religion or education.

Education so often is seen as a means to an end,
a credentialing process
rather than an invitation to stand in the presence of
a Socrates or Shakespeare
Galileo or Gandhi
Einstein or Emily Dickinson.

Education has become an industry, the church and synagogue institutions,
and the realities, which set the two in motion,
can seem as but shadows in the dimly lit corridors of our minds.

We need an epiphany once in awhile—
if not a burning bush or host of angels
Something,
some whisper that there is more to who we are and what we do
than careers and commerce . . .
some intimation that you exist
in Staunton and South Africa and Central America and Sri Lanka.

Strengthen our confidence that you are at work in us and our world
in ways we neither know or expect.

Tell us again that we matter.

Amen.

May 1, 1987

AN ODD LIBERATOR

Luke 4:14-30

And Jesus returned in the power of the spirit into Galilee, and a report concerning him was sent out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written,

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. " And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said, "Is this not Joseph's son?" And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will say, 'What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here also in your own country.'" And he said, "Truly I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country. But in truth I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed but only Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, so that they might throw him down headlong. But passing through the midst of them he went away.

I chose this text because of those hopeful, joyful, and liberating words read from Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to
preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord”

I wanted to hear something upbeat, and I wanted to preach something upbeat. If I could do that, I would be happy, and you would have nice things to say to me at the door and about me over the dinner table. That was my plan. What I found was unexpected, not what I was looking for. Perhaps it is good news in its own oddball way, but I will understand if you don't think so.

Our story begins when Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth. He is apparently living in Capernaum, a town on the Sea of Galilee. Capernaum is pretty sophisticated and prosperous compared to the hill country town of Nazareth. Little Nazareth may be poor, but it is still home, the place where Jesus' mother lives, the place of the people who loved him as a boy, taught him, watched out for him, wiped his nose and dried his tears. It is the place where many of his boyhood friends still live, many now with families of their own. Jesus goes home, home to his mother and brothers, home to his synagogue where he first learned about Isaiah and all the rest of the tradition.

Jesus is becoming famous. The hometown people have heard about him, his teaching in other people's synagogues and curing of other people's diseases. Now he is home and called upon to read the sacred text. He opens the book, reads the words of Isaiah, closes it, gives it back to the attendant, and says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him; isn't this Joseph's son? One of our own? They wondered about applying the words of Isaiah directly to himself, but they were not angry or offended.

Jesus could have left it as that. Why didn't he? These were *his* people. He seems to go out of his way to offend them.

Jesus stands up and tells them he is not going to give sight to *their* blind or set at liberty *their* oppressed. Well, why not? Is there something wrong with the people at Nazareth? Are we to believe that the blind in Capernaum were more deserving or the oppressed in other towns more faithful? I doubt that. We know Luke is concerned with the Jews' rejection of Jesus and the Gentiles' acceptance of him, but I can't believe that is the whole explanation for Jesus' appalling behavior toward the people at Nazareth. If only out of respect for his mother and brothers who have to keep on living in this town, he should not have insulted the congregation in the Nazareth synagogue. Why was Jesus offending these people? The question would not go away for me.

The answer usually given is that the Nazareth people didn't have enough faith or that they were afraid of the changes liberation would create. But the text never says that. In the text Jesus mentioned two Old Testament stories. One was about Elijah.

Once there was a famine, and God told Elijah to go to a foreign town and meet a widow, and she would feed him. Elijah found the widow all right, but she was none too anxious to acquire another mouth to feed. She was hardly an example of great faith. She first told Elijah that she didn't even have enough for herself and her son, and after they had their next meal, they would simply die of starvation. When Elijah gave her instructions from God, she went and did as he said, but let's face it, the woman didn't have a thing to lose. She was on the verge of death. The widow comes to faith only after miracles have been performed.

The other story is about Naaman, a commander in the Syrian army who had leprosy. He heard from a Hebrew slave girl that Elisha could cure him. So he went to Elisha. A man with a horrible, incurable disease who tracks down a possible cure is not an example of faith; he is an example of desperation. Elisha won't even come out of his home to meet him, tells him to go wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman is insulted and furious; he says he has plenty of rivers back home he can wash in. But one of his servants pointed out to him that he had nothing to lose by washing in the Jordan, so he did.

Where is the great faith of Naaman? There isn't any. Again, what is going on in this story? What have the people done to deserve Jesus' anger? He has stood up and said God has anointed him to proclaim good news, set the captives free, give sight to the blind so why doesn't he do it? Why won't

he give sight to the *Nazareth* blind, free *their* oppressed, cast out *their* demons? Why won't he give sight to the Staunton blind, free the South African oppressed, cast out the demons of mental illness and alcoholism wherever they are found?

Oh, I understand the people in Nazareth. Their question is very familiar to me. I must have spent two days this week stuck on that one question. Why is there so little liberation? Jesus, if you are the anointed one, why? Suddenly I realized my questions sound very familiar. These people whom Jesus loves present him with the same temptation as the devil in the temptation story just before our story. "If you are the Son of God," the devil says. "If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread." The temptation also turns up as the soldiers and rulers taunt Jesus on the cross. "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself." "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, the chosen one."

If you are the Son of God, do something. If you are the Son of God, work miracles for us. Free us from our troubles. Cure us of the human condition of suffering. And Jesus won't do it. His promises seemed so extravagant, their hopes were so high, is it any wonder they had tried to kill him?

When I first realized that what I wanted and what the people of Nazareth wanted was just what the devil wanted and just what the soldiers and rulers wanted, I was stunned. I started shaking all over. I realized that Jesus was never going to relieve me of the human condition of suffering and in fact had never done so for anyone. Yes, Jesus did miracles, but the people he healed did not live happily ever after. They ran short of money, had fights with their relatives, came down with other diseases, and finally died. Having one's sight restored or lameness cured does not relieve one of the human condition of suffering. But still, relief from one problem is better than nothing. Why heal Naaman and not me? Why feed the widow at Sidon but not the starving of Bangladesh? Why raise Lazarus from the dead but not the eight million other Jews who died in the Holocaust? Why cast out the demon of the man in Capernaum, but leave hopelessly deranged people to live and die at Western State? If you are the Son of God, *why?*

He never said. Passing through the midst of them, he went away. The silence echoes down the halls of the ages from that day to this. No answer. Does this mean there is no good news in this story? Is it good news that occasionally there will be miracles but God will do them according to

some strange divine logic, and we will have no control over it? The Naamans and starving widows and Lazaruses will not be better or more faithful or more deserving than you or I. They will just be restored – for a time.

But strangely enough for me there was good news. Perhaps it is not logical at all, but suddenly it was all right that God probably won't pull a miracle out of the hat for me. Suddenly the fact that I am at all was miracle enough. Life was gift enough. Not that you or I should ever adjust to and accept oppression and suffering, ours or others. You know I'm not saying that. Oppression and suffering are still the enemy, the evil we are to overcome with good. But though we may hate suffering, we don't have to be afraid of it. We can trust God. God does not have to prove anything to us and will not do so. And that is all right. God will probably not relieve our suffering, but God *will* show us the way to joy.

I suspect that it will take me a lifetime to understand the kind of joy that has so little to do with relief from suffering, to understand the liberation of people *in* history that has nothing to do with the liberation of people *from* history, to understand the proclamation of the acceptable year of the Lord in the midst of war, famine, disease, tyranny, and death. Jesus left Nazareth that day without a single miracle. Passing though the midst of them he went away.

They couldn't hear what he had to say. He couldn't do what they wanted him to do. I understand them. Now can I understand Jesus?

Nikos Kazantzakis and Martin Scorsese are wrong. The last temptation of Christ was not the temptation to be human. The first temptation of Christ, the last temptation of Christ, and the everlasting temptation of Christ is to be divine.

BACKYARD INVENTORS

Our Gracious God,

We are something like backyard inventors
out in a little shed
trying to put together a life
with no instruction sheet to tell us exactly how that may be done.

We nail things together,
rip things apart
and generally experiment,
trying to figure out
what will work.

Sometimes we stand back and look at what we've done
and want to strike a match to it
and start over.

Other times we take a long look and think,
"God, that's beautiful.
I should get a patent on it."

But mostly we just keep working at it - -
in night's darkness
and at noontime,
in fair weather
and foul.

As we look at ourselves in our mirrors each morning
may we see at least a dim reflection of the One
who brought us out of the watery chaos
and formed us in the Creator's image.

Amen.

April 4, 1987

REFLECTIONS ON FAMILY

Mark 3:20-35

John 19:25-26

Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus was his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son."

Today, I want to reflect for a few minutes on families. Family. The word conjures up warmth, home and hearth, good food, a fire in the fireplace, love and understanding. The reality falls short of that pretty picture – for me at least – maybe for you, too.

There are no people I expect more of than I do my family. I expect understanding, love, intimacy, compassion, forgiveness. There are also few people who can produce as much frustration in me, guilt in me, as can members of my own family. From books, television, magazines, and Christian literature I have this image of what families are supposed to look like, of how people are supposed to relate to each other, and my bunch just doesn't measure up. Have you had that problem? I'm tempted to try to figure out who is to blame. Whose fault is it? Sometimes I blame them. Sometimes I blame myself, an unpleasant business all around.

The matter is complicated, because the only family member you ever get to choose is your husband or your wife. The rest of them come to you by the luck of the draw. Parents, children, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren. In-laws. You've got to live with these people, and you didn't get to pick them out. I was thinking about families while on vacation. Normally, I and the three other members of my immediate family live in a seven-room house. On vacation, there were six of us spanning three generations living in a four-room townhouse at Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I keep a sort of journal, and on one frustrating day of that vacation I wrote:

I have never fully understood why families go on vacation. You leave home and live out of a suitcase. You leave behind all your friends (support system, they call it these days), and you go someplace where you don't know anybody but these people in your family. You live in cramped quarters, eat all your meals together – what modern family does that except on vacation – and generally see more of each other than is healthy. You are supposed to be so enamored of the ocean, the lake, the mountains, the museums that you don't get on each other's nerves. What could be more wrong! It usually works the other way around. You are getting on each other's nerves so much that the ocean, the lake, the mountain, the museum, become boring. The wonders of man and nature no longer impress you, because your attention is focused on that irritating mannerism of hers or that dumb comment of his. I have decided vacations should be taken (a) alone or (b) with a friend, if and only if you can afford separate hotel rooms or wish to end the relationship at the end of the vacation. (That works with spouses but is less effective with parents, children, or other blood relatives.)

That was my assessment of the traditional family vacation at mid-vacation this year. Being crammed into four rooms with my parents, my children, and my husband was the catalyst of this sermon. I began thinking about families and the four gospels.

First thing I noticed was that for all the talk about Christian families, the gospels are almost devoid of families. Think about it. There are Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, two sisters and a brother. They are all grown up. Why aren't they married? Where are their children? They have to be reasonably young, or people wouldn't have been so upset when Lazarus died. Would Jesus have brought Lazarus back to life if he had been a decrepit old man of 102?

Then there is Zacchaeus. Jesus goes home to eat with him. Is there no wife or children? Having eaten with small children, it occurred to me that maybe that's why Jesus picked him. He didn't want to share lunchtime with munchkins. There is a whole flock of apparently single women. Luke mentions Mary Magdalene and Susanna. He also mentions Joanna and says she was married, but she is traveling with Jesus through the cities and villages, and her husband apparently is not. Which brings us to the matter of

the disciples. These guys left home without consulting their wives – indeed, without informing their wives. They left their fishing boats and followed him. Doesn't anybody ever wonder what the wives and children of these men thought when they got word that the husband or father had run off with an itinerant rabbi?

It is a curiosity that the Old Testament is full of families and genealogies. The New Testament is full of single people or separated people or people whose marital status is unknown. The heroes of the Old Testament are mostly married: Abraham, Moses, King David, Solomon. The New Testament has John the Baptist (no wife mentioned), Jesus (unmarried), and Paul (unmarried). It would be unfair, I think, to label Christianity as anti-family, but it is strangely silent about the family. Aside from a few sayings on divorce, the subject is simply not broached. So I decided to take a look at Jesus' relationship to his mother and his brothers to see if there is anything worth learning there, anything at all that would enlighten me. This is risky business, because I am using texts for a purpose for which they were never intended, but I shall go ahead and sin boldly.

There are some observations one can make by looking at Jesus' relationship to his mother that might be useful to us as we try to live with our own relatives. There is no evidence to suggest that Mary ever understood Jesus' work or understood Jesus, for that matter. He stays behind in the temple on his visit to Jerusalem at the age of twelve. His parents have to travel a whole day to get back to Jerusalem and then spend three days trying to track him down. Mary is put out with him, as any parent would be. When he is grown, she thinks something is wrong with him and shows up to take him home, hardly a picture of an enthusiastic mother promoting her son's career. With book stores and talk shows awash in people telling us that we ought to understand our children, it was a revelation and even a comfort to know that Mary did not do a bit better than most of the rest of us – not that understanding one's children and other fellow human beings isn't a good thing. It is. But it's not "the way things are supposed to be." It is not "normal." It is a miracle. It is grace. It is holy ground.

It is interesting to me that Jesus never asked of his mother and brothers, as far as we know, that they be anything more to him than family. Jesus never went home and begged his mother to understand him or give his ministry her blessing. In the book of Acts, Jesus' brother James turns up as a leader in the Jerusalem church, but that's the first and only time in the

New Testament that any family members are mentioned as Christians. When Jesus wanted understanding, he relied on his disciples and friends, people he had chosen. At times he would become impatient with his disciples and friends when they did not understand. When he went to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray, he took his friends and begged them to stay awake. They did not. He made demands upon his friends, even though they often disappointed him. There is no evidence that he made the same demands on his family. He never expressed frustration or disappointment with Mary or his brothers. He never criticized them for their failure to understand him.

This raised the question in my mind, “Do we expect too much of our family members?” We share with them not only our lives but a close genetic history that goes back to the beginning of time. Except for a husband or wife, we can’t get a divorce from them. We are stuck with them. And they with us. Are we asking too much when we expect them to be supportive of our choices and our work, to be understanding? Are we asking too much of ourselves when we expect a close relationship with grown children and feel guilty if it isn’t storybook perfect? Are we asking more from our families than Jesus asked from his? Sometimes we find our closest friends right within the bosom of our family. That’s wonderful when it happens, but when it doesn’t, can we relieve each other of guilt and blame? Is it possible to accept one another without having to approve of or even understand one another? Is that what Jesus is up to?

What was Jesus’ family to him and he to them? If they weren’t friends exactly, if his mother didn’t understand him, what was the basis of their relationship? Mary rarely appears in the gospels, but she does turn up at the cross. When most of his friends have betrayed or abandoned him, Mary comes back into the picture and stands at the foot of the cross and watches her son die. Jesus sees her and entrusts her to the care of a disciple. You don’t have to understand or approve to love enough to stand by, to be with one who is dying or in deep trouble. That’s what family is for.

This story made me reflect on my own relationship with my mother. It was stormy. I went away from home, went to boarding school at sixteen in part to get away from home. Both of us have made greater demands on each other than Jesus ever made of his mother. We love each other. But there is a difference between loving and understanding, between loving and getting along.

While Ron and I were visiting my parents in the summer of 1985, it became apparent that we were going to have to move. I was absolutely crushed. I was having to give up some of the things I treasured most. At nearly forty years of age I was going to have to sell the only house we had ever owned and live, once again, in someone else's dwelling. I was giving up friends. I was giving up the city I loved. I was giving up two jobs I had intended to keep. I was giving up a dream of at last finding a home, a place that would be permanent. It was devastating. For an hour or two I wandered around the grounds of the three schools that are right across the street from my parent's house: Tomlinson Elementary where I spent grades 1 through 6, Ferndale Junior High (now a middle school) where I spent grades 7 through 9, High Point Central High where I went to the 10th grade. I came back into my parent's yard, sat on the front steps (the same steps pictured in many Easter morning snapshots of me and my sister decked out in new dresses, hats, and gloves, often wearing corsages as was the custom), and I cried. I cried for hours. The rest of my family went to my aunt and uncle's for dinner. I didn't go. When they all came home, I was in bed. I was down under the covers with the light off, but the blue electronic light of the television illuminated the room. Mother tiptoed in and kissed me on my forehead as she did when I was a little girl. Tears streamed down my face.

Mary may not have understood Jesus' parables, but she loved him. She stood at the foot of the cross.

A kiss.

A vigil with a dying son.

Maybe it's enough.

Maybe it's enough.

With love and gratitude to my mother.

August 11, 1985

REMEMBERING JENNIFER

Our Gracious God,

We mourn the loss of Jennifer Kibler.

There will be an empty place where she should have been:

at Stuart Hall graduation this spring,

in the processional at some university four years hence,

in the law profession she intended to pursue in her grandfather's footsteps,

at the tables of family and friends who love her still.

The world is a poorer place because she is not with us.

Be kind and merciful to Jack, Judy, James, and her family and friends
who will miss her always.

Hear their cries and do not let them fall.

Lead them "thru the storm, thru the night."

Grant them peace in the midst of their sorrow.

God, the magnitude of misery Jennifer and her family have undergone
is breathtaking,

and yet such misery seems to be the common lot of humanity.

How are we to love such a world as this where beautiful children
are snatched away from us?

Surely you must know that anger, hedonism, cynicism, and despair
can be counted as rational responses to experience.

Don't let life snuff out our hope.

If you want us to sing doxologies with the choirs of angels,
you are going to have to teach us the music.

Guide our feet, and "lead us to the light."

Enlarge our souls.

Amen.

September 29, 1995

Jennifer Kibler was the daughter of Judy Kibler and Professor John Kibler. She died of cancer nine years after the original diagnosis. She was a senior at Stuart Hall at the time of her death.

Quotes are from the Thomas Dorsey hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

GOD AND THE HIDDEN GOOD

II Samuel 11: 1-12:15

But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

From David's perspective, I'm sure it seemed to start out innocently enough. There he was on his roof. There she was in her house. And she was so beautiful. He just thought he'd borrow her for an afternoon. He never intended to keep her. He was going to give her back. But he had been under a lot of stress lately. It was tough being king. There was no Congress or opposition political party to blame things on. David was responsible for military affairs, domestic affairs, and foreign affairs. A man with that much to cope with might just turn to a little affair of his own to get his mind off things. Not that he didn't have a palace full of wives already. He did. But there is always something more intriguing about the new person, or so he thought.

So he found out who she was, sent for her, and took her to his bed. She went home, and that would have been the end of it – except she got pregnant. Her husband, Uriah, would know the child wasn't his because he had not been home lately. So David schemed to get him home, to fix things so that he would believe the child was his. He sent for him as if he simply wanted Uriah to report on how the fighting was going. That was a lie. The royal cover-up had begun.

When his schemes to get Uriah to sleep with Bathsheba failed, David was driven to what amounted to murder. Not only was Uriah killed in battle, several of the other officers were too. Men died so that David could keep his dirty little secret, and in the end it all came out anyway. Nathan the prophet went to David and told him that man-and-his-lamb-story. David didn't even recognize himself; he was so sure he had gotten away with it. Nathan told him that not only had he not gotten away with it, his child would die, he will be publicly humiliated, and his descendants, some of them, would die violent deaths. David knew that everyone would know about what he had done. People were going to hold him responsible for Uriah's death, and he would be the subject of other people's jokes and ridicule. A laughingstock and a murderer. How do you get up every morning and face the world when you know that is what people think of you? How do you go on? When have you failed so completely, what do you do?

But David isn't the only person in this story. Nathan interests me too. On the surface, Nathan seems to be this brave man who, at God's request, goes to the King and tells him what he has done wrong. No one could fault Nathan for his courage. But Nathan is not without his faults. He so is bound to the culture of his time that he thinks that David has sinned only against Uriah the Hittite by stealing his wife. Nathan thinks of it almost as a crime of property.

It never occurs to Nathan that Bathsheba might have sinned as well. It never occurs to him that Bathsheba might have suffered. She is compared to a pet lamb, an animal owned and controlled by its owner. Nathan even says that the punishment that will come to David is that God will give his wives to another man, and that man will have intercourse with them in public. To Nathan, women are simply objects that even God uses to reward and punish men. He doesn't see them as people in their own right. Nathan can also imagine a God who would do such things as reach into the crib of an infant to make it sicken and die in order to punish the child's father.

The fault may not lie with Nathan but with the storyteller who has read into history an explanation for events that occurred later. The authors of Job and Hosea as well as Jesus himself would all call into question such simplistic interpretations of the will of God and the role of God in human tragedies. But in the story as it now stands, Nathan was in his finest hour. No doubt he told and retold the story many times of how he stood up to

the King, but he never knew that he too was a deeply flawed man, “and his understanding was not perfect.”

Then there was Bathsheba. She hasn't a single line of dialogue. She is more a prop than a person. We are told who her father was but not her mother, because her father was her “owner” of sorts, the one who had the authority to give her away to her husband. The marriage was undoubtedly arranged; she did not choose her husband. She did not choose David either. We are never told what she thought of David's summons to the palace or whether she consented to his advances, because it was not really her place to consent or deny David. He was a man and a king and had authority. Then David has her husband killed and she has to marry David. So she ends up in the palace with all his other wives, married to the man who essentially murdered her husband. She has to watch her baby die and is told that it is God's punishment on David.

What about Bathsheba? She is the one who mourns this lost child, not David. How does she go on? A dead husband, a forced marriage, and a dead son all in a year's time. How does a person keep going after living through such tragic events and having so little control over her destiny? At first glance the events in this story may seem so extreme that we can't relate to David and Bathsheba and Nathan, but when you stop and think about it, maybe elements of it are very much in our stories as well. David made a decision one afternoon that at the time seemed such a little thing, but the consequences of that decision were with him for the rest of his life. We all know what it is to make a decision that turns out to have enormous consequences that we failed to anticipate. Sometimes it turns out well, but sometimes it doesn't, and we play it back in our minds over and over. If only one little thing had been different, our lives would be different today. History would be forever altered. But you can't go back, and now you are stuck with living with things as they are instead of things as they might have been. Some of us know about that.

David's public humiliation is also something that is familiar to us. It can happen that you are the discussion at other people's dinner tables. It is your life they are analyzing and psychoanalyzing, your morals they are judging, your misery they are second-guessing, your name in the clever little jokes they tell. You may want to scream that had they been in your place, they may not have done a bit better, but they can't hear you, and they don't care.

Bathsheba's situation is not unfamiliar to us either. Some of us know what it is to have the circumstances of our lives slip completely out of our control. Someone else's decisions have turned our world upside down, and there isn't a thing we can do about it. Events happen that are beyond anyone's control. An illness strikes, and you may face living with it from now on, or even dying from it. Someone dies. Your marriage isn't all you had hoped it would be; you've tried everything you know to do, but you haven't made much headway. You live with depression, and you've been treated for it. It gets better at times, but you wonder if it will ever get to the point where you are rid of it once and for all.

When we are in situations like these, it is hard to see how things could ever be better. It is hard to see the light at the end of the long, dark tunnel we are in. We often hope for some miracle that will change everything, remove the conditions under which we live. God, undo it, change it, make it not so. Even Jesus hoped this in the Garden of Gethsemane when he prayed, "Father, if it be possible, let this cup be removed from me ... but not my will but thine." Sometimes it happens that way, but more often it does not. In the fairy tales, the fairy godmother may wave her magic wand and make everything different. The handsome prince may arrive at just the right moment to rescue the princess, but in real life Uriah stayed dead, and so did Bathsheba's baby boy, and Jesus was crucified.

But what David and Bathsheba couldn't see, and what even Nathan couldn't see, was that God has a way of bringing good out of even the worst of circumstances. No matter how big our mistakes, how great our sin, God can work to bring forth the good. No matter how oppressive the situation we are in, God can work in it to bring life. But most often it happens not by magic, but in the ironic way it happened to David and Bathsheba. I love the story because of its irony.

After all of the tragedy, there is a kind of Godly redemption. Bathsheba's second son lived, and his name was Solomon. He became king, some say a very good king as monarchs go, and he was especially known for his wisdom. I like to think he got that from his mother, that Bathsheba was a woman of so much wisdom and dignity that she somehow transcended the prejudice and oppression of her society and brought up her son to be a king and the wisest of men. We will never know, because the storyteller had little interest in Bathsheba except as she crossed David's path, but I suspect here is an untold story of enormous courage.

But the greatest irony is that Jesus was a descendent of David and Bathsheba, according to Matthew, who makes a point to mention her, although he does not use her name but refers to her as the woman who had been Uriah's wife. Solomon was a child who never should have been conceived. Uriah and Bathsheba should have lived out their lives together having children of their own, children who, as it turns out, were never born.

The good that came out of this situation did not cancel out the bad; it didn't fix it. They and we may still have to live with situations we don't like, but there may be some miracle of grace coming our way that we could never have foreseen. Our future is more open, more hopeful than even the prophets can foresee. The irony is that we are not as righteous and heroic as we like to believe, but even at our worst, and in the worst times of our lives, there is a hidden good, a God, that is more than we could hope for or imagine. So do not despair – not for yourself, your life, or the world out there with its corruption, greed, and terrible suffering. God knows how to work with who and what we are. Look again. For those who have the eyes to see it, God is still at work in God's quiet, hidden way, redeeming the world.

WHITHER THE SPOTLIGHT?

All the attention that the Virginia Women's Institute for Leadership
brought to this campus
has made for an odd school year.

Now we know how the Samoans might have felt
when they came to the attention of Margaret Mead.

People and newspapers who heretofore had never expressed the slightest
curiosity about us
were on our doorstep.

At professional meetings our colleagues asked us our opinions on
constitutional issues.

At family reunions we were trapped into conversations about gender equity
with third cousins to whom we had never spoken about
anything weightier
than the best recipe for chess pie
or the fortunes of the Washington Redskins.

We could pick up the paper and read about ourselves,
yet we were just the same people we had always been,
our days spent doing the same things we had always done.

If we needed a reminder that the media outlets give a distorted picture
of what is important, even what is true,
we got it.

It could be that what happened in the mind of some freshman sitting
silently in her class will turn out to be of greater significance to
humankind than the events on the front page.

It could be that the runner on the track, lost in thought,
pushed her way into greater insight
than appeared in any of the editorials in the *Washington Post*
the same week.

The spotlights aim, the cameras roll, Dan Rather speaks,
and the angels laugh with unrestrained amusement.

They know that the center ring in the human circus is everywhere at once:
Judge Kiser's courtroom, a Pearce Science lab, a lounge in Spencer.
Sacred ground is all around us,
under our feet even in this moment.

God, don't let us be fooled by the foolishness of the world.
Give us your God's eye view, you who knows when a sparrow falls
and counts a classroom as holy ground.

Amen.

February 25, 1994

CHRISTMAS MEDITATION I

Christmas Cheer 1991

I was talking with a friend a few weeks ago about the Charles Dickens story, *A Christmas Carol*. She asked me why I thought people liked the story so; what was the secret of its enduring popularity? I don't know, but I suspect it has something to do with this: as we watch Ebenezer Scrooge change, we change too...just for a little while, just for a few hours or a few days.

Ebenezer Scrooge, who has shut himself off from his nephew, his employee, his neighbors, all his fellow human beings as well as his own past, with the visits of the three spirits gets connected again to the people around him. The walls he has erected to keep others out come tumbling down. By the end of the story he has become warm and loving, generous with his money, and he emerges as a joyful human being. As we watch, we can imagine ourselves emerging the same way. Does this happen to you when you read *A Christmas Carol*?

Suddenly you wonder what it would be like to be fully reconciled with relatives with whom your relationships have been difficult or even hostile. You imagine yourself being the one to see that some twentieth-century Tiny Tim lives to adulthood and is no longer crippled. You imagine yourself throwing open the checkbook and with abandon giving gifts to stem the tide of hunger, homelessness, disease, and devastation of all kinds – and for pure pleasure. People rise up and call you blessed because of your generosity of spirit and of pocketbook and the sheer joy with which you live life.

It doesn't take long for reality to set in. Our estranged relatives are not really so welcoming and inviting and gracious as was the nephew of Ebenezer Scrooge. No, reconnecting with these people is a tougher nut to crack.

More and more in this recession the needy are people we know personally, but as we look out across the nation and the world, many of the needy are not so attractive as Tiny Tim nor do their families measure up to the Cratchits, who seem to have hearts as filled with kindness, forgiveness, and love as their pockets are empty of money. As for our financial resources, they are not as great as those of Ebenezer Scrooge.

So our transformation is undone; it founders on the hard rocks of reality as we knock up against the world as it is. We close the book on Dickens with his appealing poor people and his transformed Scrooge. But next Christmas, off the shelf will come this book; into the VCR will go the tape.

Why? Why do we keep coming back to hear again the story of the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge? It could be that we just like that emotional high we get even though we have not the first intention of actually being more generous or more loving. Is it just sappy sentimentality at work? I think that is too cynical an interpretation. I think that something in us knows that Ebenezer Scrooge discovered a truth that is just as real and ever so much more powerful than what we call reality, with its balance sheets and its caution and its despair of significant change in people or the world. I think we love the story so, not because we want to escape reality, but because we want to find it.

In the prologue to the gospel of John the people say:

“We have *all* received grace upon grace.

No one has ever seen God,

but the Son has made him known.”

The people who wrote that, who said it out loud as a community, lived in a world of large standing armies, high taxes, family problems, social problems, disease, and death. How could they say such things? Were they lying to themselves, hiding from the truth by using high-sounding religious language to drown out the cries of pain around them, or had they been transformed themselves by an encounter with God? Had they been stripped of their despair and the comfortable lies they told themselves that the world is so difficult that you can't expect much, so why try? Ebenezer Scrooge was not a real person, but the people whose faith lies behind the gospel of John were very real. And we came this evening to First Presbyterian Church to hear a chorus of voices sing these words: “From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.” They bear witness to the divine possibility that God-Is-With-Us. *God is at work at transforming any who wish it. God-is-among-us transforming the human community.* We are no longer Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female. We are one – Asian, Hispanic, African, Anglo.

Maybe you cannot believe it. If not, Christmas will remain a pleas-

ant holiday for you.

But if you can believe it, Christmas becomes a holy day. If you can believe it, Christmas becomes an encounter with the God no one has ever seen, a transforming submission to the refiner's fire that burns away the petty and insignificant and consumes the walls that divide us.

"From his fullness may we all receive grace upon grace."

OUR LIST AND YOUR LIST

Our Gracious God,

The season of Christmas and Hanukkah is upon us,
and some of us are in danger
of counting the whole celebration as a project
with numerous tasks to be put on a list,
accomplished, and checked off.

Far from its being a time of reflection and good fellowship,
it can become a time of extra work and longer hours.

Thus I humbly bring to you a few suggestions of how you might help us
become better and wiser, not simply fatter and poorer.

If it could be arranged for Staunton to have a power outage for just one evening,
we might just be able to talk to one another without
competing with a television or stereo
and
without guilt because we are not doing anything productive like
balancing the checkbook or painting the guest room or baking a cake.

We could simply be alone with our thoughts
or talk to someone we love
or read books by candlelight.

I realize the hardship for the power company,
and perhaps we should be able to do this on our own,
but you know how we are.

May every person here get a call or a card from someone saying,
“I just wanted to thank you for what you taught me, for what you
have been for me and done for me.”

Aftershave and bedroom shoes are nothing compared to that.
And yes, we know it is a gift that can be given as well as received.

God, this is a weary crowd, so I ask for us one morning in which we are
awakened by the sun instead of the alarm clock,

Grant us one morning to rise because we are rested instead of rising because
we are dutiful and wouldn't be late for work.

I'm sure there are other things we need,
but maybe it is time for us to hear your list,
your hopes and dreams for this little planet.

Whisper it in our ears.

Don't let us get through this season without hearing your voice.

It is hearing your list that has power to make us the children of God,
to make us saints.

Amen.

December 6, 1986

MY BURDEN IS LIGHT: A MEDITATION

For Shenandoah Presbytery

Micah 6:6-8

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Matthew 26:6-14

Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simòn the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his head as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, “Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor.” But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, “why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her.”

The Jewish people asked,

“What do you want from us, God?

year-old calves ... will that do it?

thousands of rams ... will that be enough?

ten thousand rivers of oil?

how about my first-born son?

What will it take?”

And the prophet answered,

“You know very well what it takes.

Do justice.

Love mercy; love kindness.

Walk humbly with God. “

Did Micah think that was easy?
I don't.

For starters,
 there is no consensus on justice.
Justice according to Robert Bork?
Justice according to Ted Kennedy?
Justice according to Jesse Jackson?
Justice according to the U.S. Catholic Bishops, Jerry Falwell,
 Pat Robertson, the National Council of Churches?
 Other people?

There is no common vision of justice,
 but even if there were,
 could we live by it?

If you and I were free to define justice any way we wanted,
 could we say we are living by it?
Do we even want to try?

And what about mercy?
Is not mercy or kindness often at odds with justice?
 When you dole out mercy too freely,
 don't you simply encourage sin?
Doesn't all this talk of mercy weaken the demands of the gospel?
Mercy or cheap grace?

Walking humbly with our God is not a major problem for Presbyterians.
Walking humbly with the Baptist, Methodists, or Unitarians –
 that's a challenge –
 but not God.
Humbly is about the only way one can walk with the God of
 John Calvin.

No wonder those Jews asked about
 thousands of rams
 rivers of oil
 and first-born children.
Those demands may be excessive, but at least they are specific.

What does God want?
a tithe?
a tithe and choir membership?
a tithe, choir membership, service on the session?
tithe, choir membership, service on the session, and Saturdays
spent working at food bank?
forgiving seven times seventy?

What does it take?

The disciple knew what he was talking about.

Don't you have to help the poor?

Isn't that essential?

How can Jesus possibly sanction this lavish,
even ostentatious, gift when people are hungry?

And this woman ... didn't it occur to her that Jesus
might be critical of her and her gesture?

How could she believe that the man who had critiqued
the ethics of the Pharisees, admired throughout the ancient world
for their morality, that a man who could argue the Jewish
law with the best of them

would accept her gift without judgment upon her?

How could she have trusted Jesus so much?

How could she dare to come before him so boldly with her flask of oil?

God, if only that could happen for us.

...to trust Jesus enough to give him the gift we really
want to give

and know he will accept it with joy and gratitude.

and know he will accept us,

accept us with love as he did the woman who knelt before him?

Could it be that is what the Lord requires?

Dare we believe that his yoke is easy
his burden is light?

January 27, 1987

TREASURES IN REQUIREMENTS

Our Gracious God,

Students are filling the campus, our postal, e-mail and voice mail boxes,
and knocking on our office doors.

They've got dozens of reasons for being here,
many of which have nothing to do with a thirst for knowledge.
But maybe they aren't so different from us;
our motives aren't always pure either.

How many of us would be here today if, over the summer,
we had suddenly fallen heir to a vast fortune
that made a paycheck unnecessary?

Some of us, surely ...well, part time...
... with a reduced teaching load and no committees
... in semesters occurring in odd-numbered years.

Much as we love to talk about freedom
and deeds done for the love of a thing,
much of what fills our days is done of necessity.

In this land East of Eden, we must work to live.
Though it can be a hard place, teach us to love it so;
transform our necessity into delight.

As the women used to take fabric scraps and turn them into glorious quilts,
take all that seems useless or onerous
and make of it a life lovely to behold.

Maybe if you can do that for us,
we can pass along such divine wisdom to students,
who need to learn that treasures can be hidden in requirements.

May we go with your blessing,

Amen

August 26, 1997

CHARTER DAY ADDRESS

*Charter Day is a ceremony in which new students
vow to obey the honor code and sign the Charter.*

This ceremony and commencement are the most important events in our life together as a college, as a community. I don't need to tell you how important commencement is; you know. Formal invitations go out, relatives come, and people give you gifts.

It is not so obvious that this event is important. What is happening here? All schools have rules and ways to deal with those caught disobeying them. Is this ceremony simply a way of repackaging the rules by calling it an honor code? When you come up front and sign, is that just an agreement to abide by the regulations of this place? I don't think so. It is more like getting married. Actually, the whole process of choosing a college reminds me of choosing a marriage partner.

People choose colleges in much the same way they choose spouses. If you ask them why this one, they have a whole list of perfectly good reasons, wonderful qualities the person has. But a lot of what goes into the choosing isn't on the list and may not be terribly logical. When you ask people why they chose a college, they will give you a list of perfectly good reasons, but a lot of the time the real reasons are hard to put into words.

The patterns of choosing a spouse are similar. Some people marry their childhood sweetheart. And some people go to the college they've always known about, possibly because a parent attended. Is there someone here whose baby clothes included a Mary Baldwin T-shirt? I remember a student who arrived with her mother's Mary Baldwin yellow-and-white pennant to hang in her room. (I thought it looked a little old and asked her about it.) So there are students for whom Mary Baldwin is their childhood sweetheart, so to speak.

Then there are the love-at-first sight folk. Never had given the place much thought until they saw it. They fell in love. That was it.

There are those who dated around. Applied to three, six, ten colleges. They visited. They went to admission weekends. They were *experienced* when they chose. Mary Baldwin seemed like the best fit.

There are those who didn't get into their first choice. But many a

fine marriage has been made between people who didn't get their first choice. Lots of folks have in their past an old love who got away. That's all right. It doesn't say a thing about how happy you will be. And there are the transfer students. The analogy holds up, but I don't think I want to get into this.

Once you chose Mary Baldwin and told people about it, you were engaged. You started buying things you would need for your new life. And you began to imagine yourself as a student here, to imagine what it would be like. Maybe there was even an engagement party of sorts before you left home, a special dinner with family or friends to mark the transition to your new life.

Everything between the time you decided to go here and this evening was the engagement. This ceremony is the wedding. In a few minutes you will take a vow, make a promise, not to obey rules but to be faithful, to be honest, to be who you say you are.

When you get married, you don't promise to obey a set of rules; you establish a relationship. You turn to another human being, look that person right in the eyes, and declare that no matter what happens, you will be there. You will love and cherish. You will live in a relationship of trust.

Tonight, in much the same way, you will tell each other, your fellow classmates, that you will not lie to them, not claim that work or possessions are yours when they are not. You will not live a lie. You will say to them: you can trust me. Then you will come down and sign your name to seal the pledge you have made. At that moment you will become a member of this community.

It won't always be easy to do what you've promised, to be what you've promised. In spite of your best intentions, things happen. You may come up short, not having studied enough for a test and think it would be so easy to slip a sheet of notes into the stack of blank paper you will be using to answer the questions. You don't want to get a low grade. Your parents will be disappointed. You'll be doing them a favor, you figure. And what difference will it really make?

A friend may ask you to help her out in ways that violate the vow you are making tonight. She will tell you she needs your help badly, that if you do it she will always be grateful, that you will prove you are a true friend.

There may come a time when you have an opportunity to take what isn't yours. You think she has more than you do; she can get another MBC sweatshirt. Who's to know? Or you think the owner deserves to have something taken from her because of what she had done to you. She has it coming.

You may find yourself in a situation that makes it a lot easier to lie to a professor, a student, an employee of the college than to tell the truth. And you reason that you might make it easier on yourself. Avoid the hassle. Tell them whatever they want to hear.

You may find you neglected to start your research paper early enough. Now the heat is on. Why not copy some obscure book your professor hasn't read or get a paper from another school's fraternity files or a commercial service.

Isn't it just human nature to give in to such pressures? And after all, doesn't this country seem to value being successful over being honorable? You don't get your face on the cover of *Time* magazine for being honorable unless you are Mother Teresa. You gain recognition for being successful. Lots of successful people have cut a few corners. Shouldn't we just accept that?

If you really believe that, do the right thing. Don't come up front and sign this paper. Go back to the residence hall, call your parents, and go home. We'll give you your money back.

The question is, do you want to live in a residence hall where little things are always disappearing and you can't trust anyone, or do you want something better? Do you want your academic work measured against that of people who cheated on tests and bought research papers, or do you want something better? Do you want to live in a place where people betray your trust and think nothing of it, or do you want something better? For that matter, do you want to live in a nation or a world where politicians routinely lie, bureaucrats are on the take, the business community is corrupt, and the academic community will stoop to anything to sell itself, or do you want something better?

If we want something better, we can have it. We stand here tonight and say to each other that we will not lie, and we will not claim as our own work or possessions that are not ours. We can say to presidents and prime ministers, members of Congress and parliaments, bureaucrats and business people, professionals and clergy and professors

and dear friends, even family, that we will not look the other way if they lie and deceive us. We will not look the other way while their corruption corrodes the trust people have in another. We will not permit them to destroy the human community.

It will not be easy. It may not seem practical. But it is the right thing to do. And it is worth it.

September 6, 1989

TO THE CREATOR AND KEEPER OF SECRETS

Our Gracious God,

A little girl once stood on a beach with sand between her toes,
held a conch shell to her ear
and heard a whole ocean.

Now she enters our classroom.

She sits before us in a desk, clean feet in good shoes.

Any roar she hears comes from the heating and cooling system.

She has her own checking account and credit cards,
and she has learned enough to know that
conch shells aren't worth much on the open market,
and they do not contain oceans.

How can we help her hear a world
in the melancholy line of a blues singer?
or glimpse the order of the universe
in the elegance of a mathematical formula?
or peer into the human condition
through the imagination of Shakespeare?
or sense that her own story is embedded in
a fossil,
a bone fragment,
a shard of pottery?

How can we enlist her to be in the search of secrets?

What will it take to make her an explorer of the universe?

Can she ever understand that we are the ones
who never got over being enchanted by the ocean in the shell,
and that the mysteries of the cosmos
are what make our pulse race?

Can she ever see that library across the way
not as just a collection of paper bound with string and glue,
but the voices and strivings of a multitude of our fellows,
telling their tales and recording their visions?

O, Creator and Keeper of the Secrets,
quicken in us all
the wonder of a child who can hear an ocean in a shell.

Amen.

August 30, 1989

CHRISTMAS MEDITATION II

Christmas Cheer 1997

Twenty years ago, I was a minister in remotest West Virginia. On Christmas Eve, it was my job to travel a half-hour from the tiny town where I lived to a little white clapboard church for a candlelight service. I would find there gathered around the wood stove in the center of the little sanctuary maybe three adults and a couple that had five children.

Kyle, a shy man who did not marry until middle age, had gotten a wife and four children on his wedding day to Jean. Soon they added a new baby. He brought his family to the old two-story farmhouse he grew up in. It was big, but “deferred maintenance” doesn’t even begin to sum up the work it needed. The family had a habit of using cars that no longer ran as doghouses. (You tie the dog to the car, and remove the door, or just leave it open, and voila, you’ve got yourself a doghouse.) These people did not need a lecture on “recycle, reuse.”

The family had land but very little cash. The children’s clothes were shabby, but being a snappy dresser was not a big priority in this sparsely settled mountain area. Their Christmas presents to us usually consisted of pork from a pig they had slaughtered. They would pull the packaged meat out of the trunk of the car after the Christmas Eve service. One Christmas somebody had died and left Jean some money, and that year the trunk was filled with real, store-bought presents, but most years they just made do. Like a lot of people in the mountains, Kyle raised a few sheep. Sheep don’t generate much money, just enough to pay property taxes on the land.

When Christmas comes each year, I can’t help but remember those six Christmases I stood around a wood stove in a white clapboard church and heard the story of the shepherds with people who were just exactly that. We read, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” And then we lighted candles to remind us of the light coming into the world, the light the darkness cannot overcome. We emerged into the dark, snowy night to try to live by that light and be the light of the world ourselves.

In those years the message of the angels came to me in a place not

so different from the hillside in Palestine where shepherds watched their flock by night. On the mountain road that passed by the little, white Presbyterian Church there were no streetlights of any kind. You could not hear a car or a train or a sound of the modern world. Silent night, holy night.

I am a city person, and I didn't much like all that darkness and silence most of the year, but on Christmas Eve I understood why some people say the closest we will ever get to God, to the Holy, the Mystery, is silence:

The silence of Christmas Eve deep in the mountains of West Virginia...

The silence of the Holy of Holies in the temple in Jerusalem, where once a year the High Priest would enter in fear and trembling

The silence after the guns have ceased on the field of battle....

The silence of a baby emerging from its mother's womb before it takes its first breath and utters its first cry....

The silence of the soul when all its strivings cease and inner voices are stilled

The silence before the creation of the world, before the first cell divided, before the first word was spoken by God

The silence of the Mystery, the Awe, the Fear...

The silence of God.

Because God is gracious, the silence is rarely broken. When the Divine appears, it is terrifying. When the Divine appeared to Isaiah, he cried out, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." When Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden, they hid and tried to cover themselves. But there is no hiding from this God whose very presence strips us bare like a tree struck by lightning, splintered down, bark burned away, naked wood exposed. All our pettiness, shallow ambition, fear and greed, hatred and bitterness, all our sorrows are burned as in the refiner's fire.

Luke tells us that this was what the coming of the Savior was like for a few shepherds watching their flocks one silent night, people not unlike Kyle and Jean – and you and me. An angel of the Lord appeared, and as Adam and Eve and Isaiah before them, they cowered in terror. But God's message did not leave them there. "Fear not, for behold I bring you good

news of great joy. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior." The shepherds were about to see and hear the glory of God. Into the dark night burst forth light. Into the silence sounded the peace and goodness of God.

When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds went down the hillside to find the most ordinary of sights, a young poor woman and her newborn child. Could they see the glory of God there as well? Can we?

Century upon century people have tried to capture the glory of God in words and in glorious music. Tonight it is our turn. Hear echoes of the voice of God. Find the glory of God deep within you. Let this music strip you bare. Let your splintered, naked soul hear the angels sing.

Amen.

Following the meditation, the Mary Baldwin College Choir and Hampden-Sydney Glee Club sang "Gloria" by John Rutter.

December 7, 1997

THE SEASON OF ANGELS

Our Gracious God,

This season of Angels and other assorted miracles can set even secular mortals to wondering what else there may be that we can't see.

Usually the morning paper can set us straight and bring us to our senses.
Angels, weeping icons of the Blessed Virgin, and dead pop singers who aren't
are the stuff of the *National Enquirer*
which we don't buy
no matter how tempting the cover
as we stand in the check-out line at the A&P.
We read the *Washington Post*, or so we say.

But in the silence of midnight
when the wind gets up
and the windows rattle
and the metal roof thunders
a person can imagine spirits unseen.

When the candles burn brightly in a dimly lit sanctuary
as cantor or choir sings the ancient songs,
other possibilities sometimes occur to us.

That is just as close to angel visitations as most of us want to get.
We don't want to be frightened to death,
we just want to know that hope is alive,
that the power of good is greater than the power of evil,
that life *means* something – even if we can't figure out exactly what.
We want to love better than we do,
let go of self-pity and self-blame,
discover joy.

If you could grant us any of these,
that would be miracle enough.

Amen.

December 2, 1988

ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEDICATION OF PAGE GARDEN

GOD: A MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTION

Mark 15:33-39

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At three o'clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, "Listen, he is calling for Elijah." And someone ran, filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down." Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son."

I've had a hard time with this sermon because I know all the right questions. I'm just not sure I know any of the right answers. As I have gotten older, the certainties of youth have faded, along with a lot of other changes that I'd rather not go into. Aging can give you humility, so this morning I bring you my humble offering.

The story began when I picked up the paper and read that India had exploded five nuclear devices. As I read about the Indian political situation over the next week, I thought about this text in Mark and the claims of Christians that real power, the power of God, was located in Jesus and especially in the crucifixion. Paul tells us over and over how outrageous that is, but its power to shock us has diminished because the story and the claims are so familiar. The decision of the Indians to join the nuclear club (as it is sometimes called) brought back the "scandal," Paul's term, for the cross. Let me explain.

When India proceeded with nuclear tests, most of the world was appalled. The decision seemed unwise on several counts. Wouldn't India

be better off spending its money developing its economy and aiding all those desperately poor citizens? This is a country that can't even provide safe water for its population. Isn't it irrational for India to anger countries that are supplying it with billions in foreign aid, which will now be cut off? Why would India risk destabilizing their part of the world, endangering not only India, Pakistan, and China, but indeed the whole world?

President Clinton called India "a perfectly wonderful country" and said "it is not necessary for them to manifest national greatness by this." Yet ninety-three percent of Indians beg to differ. Four thousand slum dwellers whose children have never been to school and who don't have a decent pair of shoes among them set off firecrackers in celebration and shouted praises to the Hindu gods. Why?

Apparently, India was worried by Chinese missiles aimed at them and tired of being ignored by the United States who, as a writer for the *New York Times* put it, "regarded India as a theme park of affliction and spirituality." What made India's action so interesting was that this is the country whose "father" was not a military leader like George Washington, but Gandhi – Gandhi, who led a nonviolent revolution that defeated the British not with guns but with moral might and political savvy. This is the country of Buddha, Mother Teresa, and now the Dalai Lama.

I think the overwhelming support by Indians for choosing to stake their nation's future on the power of weapons is completely understandable. To their way of thinking, they've been good boys and girls for fifty years of democracy, in contrast to Communist China, and all they've got to show for it is not world political power and respect but a nice movie by Richard Attenborough on Gandhi and a lot of American spiritual seekers turning up in India ashrams. They want to be taken seriously. In population, they are the second largest country in the world. They may admire Gandhi, but they have no intention of adopting his philosophy and understanding of the world.

Now, let's look at our text from Mark. Mark tells the story of a traveling teacher and miracle worker who is executed by the Roman government, perhaps because he seems to be attracting too much support among peasants, and his movement is a potential threat to order. All his friends desert him, although a few women stand at a distance to watch him die. A Roman army officer who just happens to be there observes him breathe his last and then declares that this man Jesus reveals the power of God at work

in the world. If indeed you want to see God, this is where you need to look. A Roman army officer who has carried weapons and sworn allegiance to Caesar looks at a dead man, executed as a criminal, and says, now that's *real* power.

This scene is odd, even for Jews. The heroes for the Jews were Moses, who led the people from captivity in Egypt, and David, a king with political and military power in the world. What could this mean? Do you believe this?

We too know where power is located in the world. Isn't the power of the United States based on its economic and military might? Look at higher education. Isn't the power of Harvard based on its enormous endowment and the prestige it is able to purchase through the hiring of professors who have won Nobel Prizes or whatever? The Indians know where power is in the world. The Indians may revere Gandhi, but they are not about to follow him into the twenty-first century.

I am wondering – do we do the same with Jesus? Are we more his admirers than his followers? I am not trying to indict us. I am truly struggling to understand. And what does it mean to follow Jesus in a world where the most reliable sources of power are exactly what they have always been – might and money? Is there another kind of power, and if there is, what role does it play in the world? What did the Roman army officer see as he stood at the foot of the cross?

Christians across two thousand years have answered these questions in many different ways. The Presbyterians from Northern Ireland who settled in Staunton answered differently from the German sectarians, Mennonites and Brethren, who settled just a few miles north of here in and around Harrisonburg. And it affected every nook and cranny of their lives from worship to the kinds of colleges they founded to the ways they settled disputes within their communities to their attitudes toward the government. Roman Catholics and Episcopalians have their own histories of struggling with these questions.

God is a multiple-choice question in that there are multiple answers to what it means that the power of God has been unleashed in the world and that the power was embodied in Jesus. We are never going to find answers that are adequate for all times and places. That may be a blessing, however, because it will keep the shock, the scandal of the cross, fresh for us. If we have to admit how hidden the power of God is in the

world, then we will have to keep a sharp eye out for it. Jesus said the Kingdom, the power of God, is like a treasure *hidden* in a field. It is like yeast in bread; it is like the wind – you can't see it.

Jesus was born into a great empire, Rome, whose power was obvious, crushingly obvious, and yet he kept talking about something he could see called the Kingdom of God. He thought it was more than a match for Rome. It's like a mustard seed, he said.

A lot of people admired him. A few believed him and began to see the world differently. But what did they see? I suspect you who are here this morning know what the centurion saw and know what those early followers of Jesus saw. At some time in your life, you have known a power that dwarfs even those explosions in the India desert a couple of weeks ago.

I heard one such story – of an audition for the choir a Mary Baldwin student had with Gordon Page years ago. He didn't know at the time that a terrified young woman was finding the courage to sing, a courage she would later call upon to see her through all sorts of circumstances that demanded more of her than she thought she had in her. Gordon was the instrument of the power of God unleashed in the world, yet it was hidden. Like a treasure hidden in a field, it was hidden to everyone but that frightened student.

Little events like that happen to us and through us. They seem so small, and yet they contain the power of God that sustains the whole world. Can we trust that the truth of God that the centurion saw in Jesus is the same truth that we have encountered in just such moments? Can we hang on to those experiences when the power of God seemed to flow through us? Can we believe in those events when our compassion overcame our caution and we were the presence of God to someone else, and we knew we were being who God meant us to be? The Indians and the Americans and the Chinese and the Russians have unlocked the secret of the atom and learned how to destroy life. God holds the secret to all creation and knows how to create life – even from death.

May 24, 1998

TWO TRIBUTES TO GORDON AND MOPSY PAGE

MOPSY AND MR. PAGE

By Mary Rutherford Mercer Ferguson '63

May 23, 1998

How special for all of us who have reunions this year that we can be present for the dedication of this garden! The long standing ties of Mopsy and Gordon Page to Mary Baldwin College dictated that a special place on the campus be set aside and named in their honor.

For over three and a half decades, they have been in the hearts of the 1963 graduates. We welcomed the stylish, attractive Mopsy Pool when she returned to her Alma Mater to work on a project with the Alumnae Association. When our favorite choir director was seen looking in her direction or sitting at a table with her at lunch, we all took note! We watched with great anticipation when Mopsy and Mr. Page walked together or attended events together on campus. We were romantics at heart and took seriously our self-appointed roles as Cupids. We used a lot of mental telepathy and rejoiced at every report of a Mopsy and Mr. Page sighting. We graduated before Mr. Page popped the question, but when we learned of their engagement, we congratulated ourselves on a job well done!

I think I can speak for all students of my era when we first arrived at Mary Baldwin. The choir was spoken of with reverence and as one of the most prestigious organizations on campus. Only the very best voices were selected after a week of auditions and, of course, the choir rehearsed every day. It was a real commitment. Mr. Page came across as a serious, demanding director, and I for one opted not to audition. About a year later, Mr. Page offered a glee club for less serious singers. In glee club we became acquainted with our director's lighthearted side. When the choir planned a trip to Princeton and New York City, glee club members were quick to audition for vacant slots. After that experience, some of us actually ended up choir members!

Chapel services have always been a part of life at Mary Baldwin.

When we think back on those morning services in King Building and later at First Presbyterian Church, we remember Mr. Page and the choir leading the hymns and always ready with another beautiful anthem. The service followed a format, the speakers would come and go, but the choir was constant – giving beauty, harmony, and reverence to the service. In my mind's eye, I still see Mr. Page as those in attendance saw him from the back. A head of short gray hair bouncing on top of a flowing black robe as he put his arms and body, heart and soul into his distinctive style of directing.

Mopsy and Mr. Page, on behalf of all, thank you for the years of service you have given to our college. The two of you have graced this community as student, active alumna, professor, choir director, and wife of a professor. You are always here to greet us when we return for reunions, welcoming us back as dear friends. Mr. Page, you have taken us into your alumnae choirs and reawakened in us fond memories of our student days. The nurturing, love, support, and service given through the years by the two of you very special people have blessed Mary Baldwin College and all who have entered her doors. Today, we want you to know how mindful we are of all your contributions and how grateful we are for them.

DEDICATION OF PAGE GARDEN

By Liz Jennings Shupe '70

I was truly honored and a little intimidated when asked to speak for this morning's auspicious occasion.

Honored, because rarely do I have the opportunity to tell this special couple how important they are to me personally and to the school. Mopsy and Gordon Page have been constant in my life for thirty-two years and in the college's life a lot longer. They have been like parents to me and my family – thus my affectionate terms of “Ma and Pa” Page.

And intimidated, because if I use incorrect English in any way...I will hear about it later from dear Mr. Page.

“The grass is pretty enough to lay down in, huh, Pa? The flowers are growing so good.”

Seriously, let me share a story.

There came a man to MBC
So many years ago
Whose wisdom, genius and impact
No one could really know.

“Gorgeous Gordon” he was called
Although certainly not to his face.
Just look at him this morning
He still can hold his place.

But more than just good looking
Many gifts he did possess –
Those of teacher, singer, composer
The man was truly blessed.

A learned man – a scholar
With interests too many to name
Nurturer, creator, molder of lives
Are titles he can claim.

Educating the students, choreographing the plays
And creating many a song,
He began with a choir of girls
Who became women before too long.

Always a perfect gentleman
Even with his voice booming –
He deserved the perfect lady...
In main office, she was looming.

“No prettier gal ever was born”
My Uncle Charles used to say –
“Than that Mopsy in main office”
And he’d still say that today.

Gordon must have thought the same
Her inside beauty he did see –
Their love grew and deepened
They are “blessed” as a couple can be.

Mopsy began here fifty years ago
A student, an employee, a wife,
Arranger of flowers, alumna extraordinaire,
“Gawdon” and Mary Baldwin – her life.

Come what may, she always was
Collected, calm and cool –
Serving as a role model
For all of us in this school.

Theirs is a special partnership –
One they’ve been willing to share
With hundreds of “children” along the way
And so many of us still care.

We gals are their living garden
That they did lovingly nourish

To become confident and capable...and
To go forth from this school to flourish.

*Hear the words of a master gardener – as Gordon defines the process
of growth for students in the College Hymn:*

Here we bring our childhood visions
Stirring in the quest for Truth;
Here we forge the mind's decisions
Tempered by the faith of youth.

Friendship, honor, sorrow, laughter
Are the ways by which we learn.
Knowledge first, then wisdom after,
Love that seeks not for return.

When we reach the last tomorrow
Of our days in class, on field
We will know how we must borrow,
Mary Baldwin, from thy yield.

This garden will serve as a continuous, growing tribute to Ma and
Pa...because of all you have been and continue to be to the College and its
people.

We love you and may God continue to bless you both.

REMARKS AT THE DEDICATION OF THE PAGE GARDEN

May 23, 1998

I have a strange little story to tell you about this garden. Please forget (for the moment only, I hasten to add) all the nice things you have heard about me just now, for this is the *real* truth!

This garden is here because of an incident in the past. The story involves a Mary Baldwin freshman and a Choir audition. She was a bright, attractive youngster who warned me that she “couldn’t sing a note.” We chatted for a moment, then I asked her to sing a scale for me. “What’s a scale?” she replied. I was able to demonstrate, and the audition was on. The upshot was that I sent her an invitation to join the Choir. She accepted, worked hard, and became a solid contributor. End of the *first* part of the story.

Years later, on notification that the coming Reunion would be my swan song with the Alumnae Choir, this young woman wrote a letter to Choir alumnae in which she described her mental and emotional state at the time of the tryout. She was a long way from California, homesick, and scared of “blowing it” without having even started! What to do? What to do? She had heard about the Choir, and, having decided that she must do *something*, she presented herself – shaking in her shoes and fearing the worst. I, of course, knew nothing of all this.

But also in this letter she says that from this audition she learned that she *could* do something that seemed beyond her, and that at every succeeding time when she has been tested she has used that experience as a guide – with very satisfactory results. What *we* would *like* to call the “Mary Baldwin Effect”! She thought that this Choir should give the Pages a garden – what a gargantuan idea! Against all likelihood, she asked her Choir buddies to help and now – here it is! And like all old men who cry easily I must swallow my tears as I stand here. End of the *second* part of the story? By no means! There is as yet no hovering end to the second part! My point is this: Choir became the first step in building a confident, determined personality. Lessons like these must be cherished by all of us. *We need to remember why were are a College!*

Cynthia “Kay” Huntley Fisher, ’61, see what happened. Elizabeth Branner was driven to take the Pages in hand. The creative talents of Jeff Wagner and his crew have been freed to do something other than mow the Baldwin grass. With the participation of Choir and other alumnae, and still *other* friends of Mary Baldwin, there is now another bright spot on “these hills where Beauty dwells.”

Mopsy and I are so very grateful to everyone in any way involved in this effort, but our very special thanks belong to Elizabeth for her optimism, to Jeff for his design and enthusiasm, and, of course, to Mary Baldwin for allowing it to happen here.

And now, our many, many thanks to all for being here today.

DAZZLE THE WORLD

Our Gracious God,

Finally this fall has become colorful.
The leaves are going out in a blaze of glory.
They are lucky that way, having a spectacular end.

On All Hallow's Eve we are reminded of how short our trip is
from womb to tomb
...even if the reminder comes not from religion,
but from some child
who decided to forgo the Disney and Star Wars characters
for something more traditional.

The doorbell rings and there stands a four-foot skeleton with
ghoulish skull mask.
Give it a Snickers and it will go away.
Not so our mortality.

But in the Shenandoah Valley, it is easy enough to see that one need not go
before becoming breathtakingly radiant.
Not only the leaves have been given that possibility.
It is within us too.

O God, don't let us fall to the earth without having first become as
glorious in our own way
as the trees of October.

It is our nature as surely as it is theirs.
Work through our lives to dazzle the world.

Amen

October 31, 1997



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